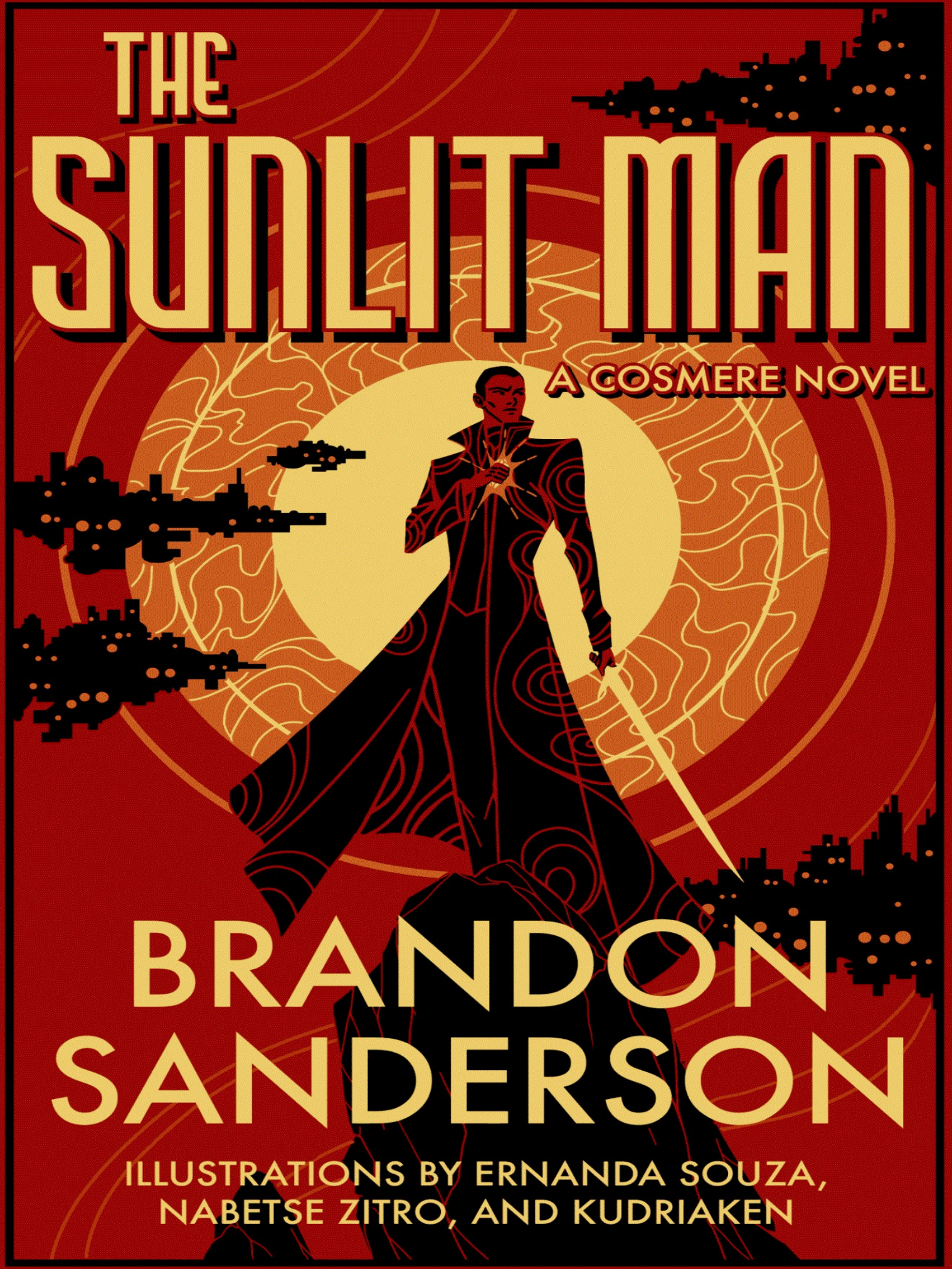
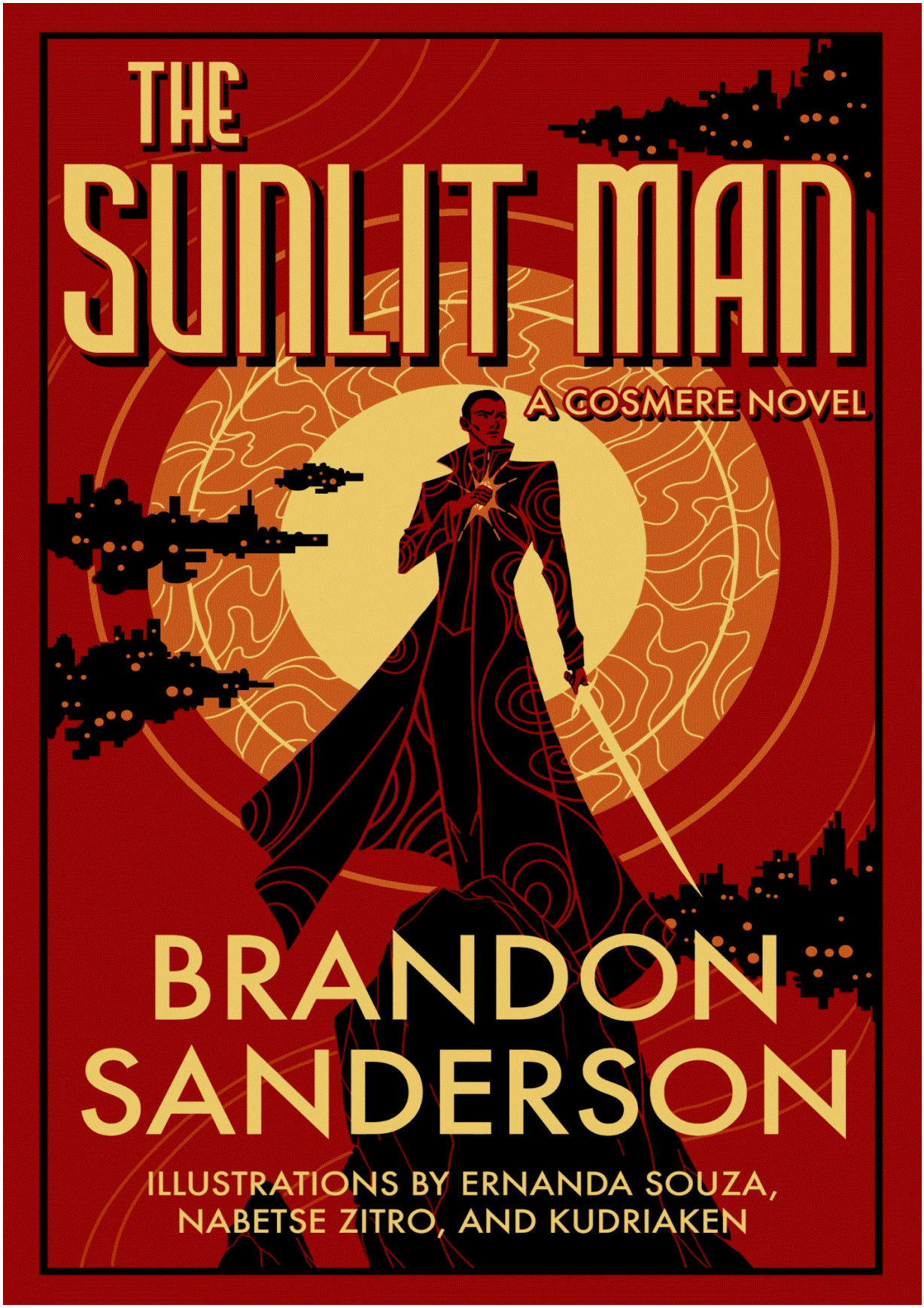
THE SUNLIT MAN

A COSMERE NOVEL



BRANDON SANDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERNANDA SOUZA, NABETSE ZITRO, AND KUDRIAKEN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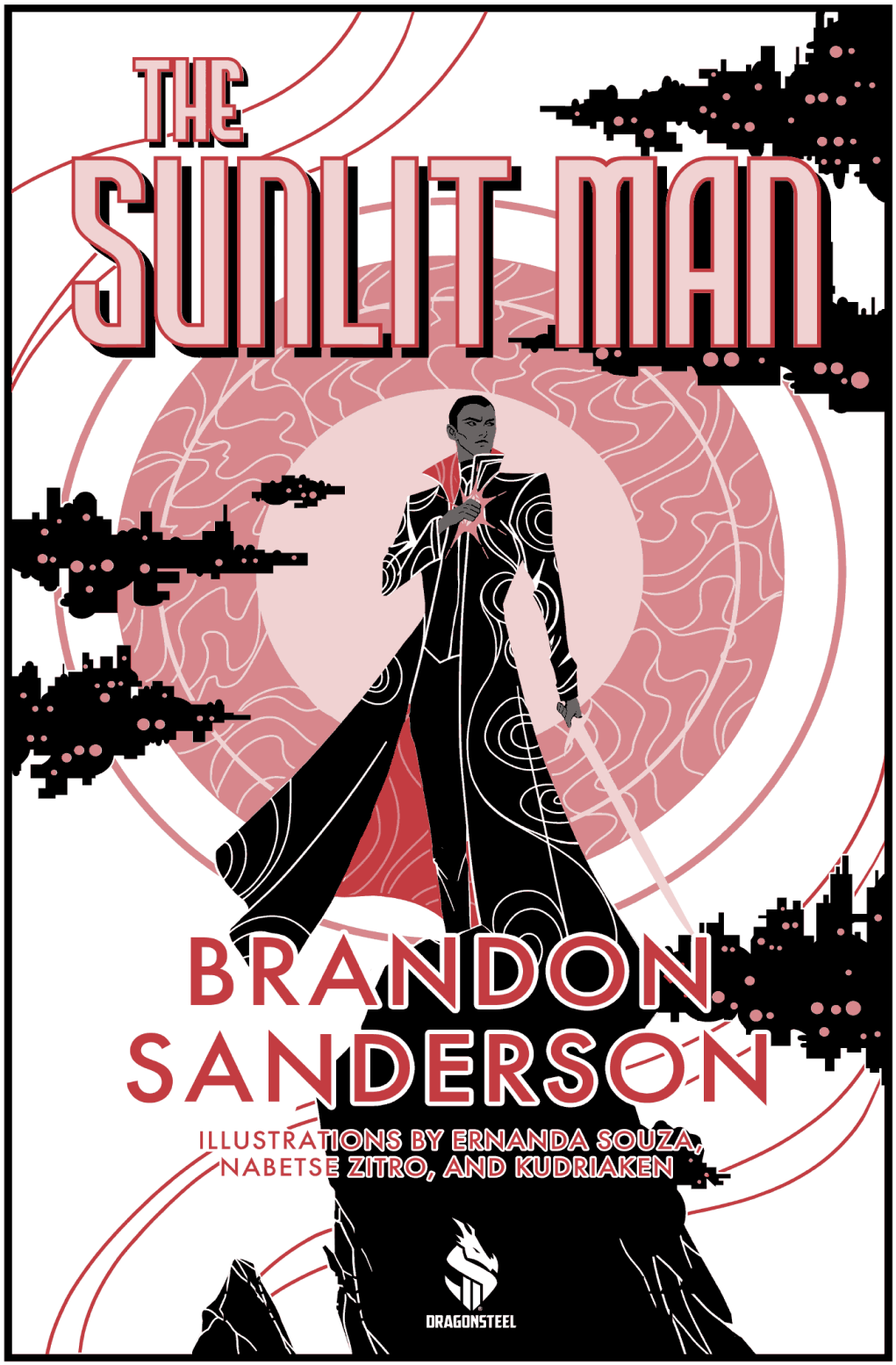
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DRAGONSTEEL

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Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgments

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Epilogue
Postscript
About the Author
Also by the Author
Copyright

ILLUSTRATIONS

Front Endpapers
The Charred
Elegy
Terrible Manners
A Connection
The Cinder King
Ambush
The Reliquary
Not a Star
Sunrise
Salute
One Who Finds
Allies
Worth Saving
Violent Warmth
Prayer to the Dying
Rear Endpapers

FOR ALL OF YOU, THE FANS OF THE COSMERE,

Who make my dreams come to life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEW! WHAT A YEAR! This was quite the wild ride, involving a *ton* of work from everyone involved. I'll make sure to get to them all in this section, but I just wanted to say a big thank-you to everyone. It was a herculean effort to get these books edited, illustrated, and delivered.

Our editor on this book was Moshe Feder, my longtime partner in crime and the man who discovered me. We were thrilled to work with him again, and I'm glad he was here to help me with this next step of Nomad's journey. A special thank-you goes to Dr. Joseph Jensen for his help with the astrophysics, as this one is a bit of a doozy as far as that is concerned. Also, the Cosmere Arcanist team—you guys are great.

I'm represented by the remarkable team at the JABberwocky Literary Agency, with Joshua Bilmes at the helm. Thanks also to Susan Velazquez and Christina Zobel.

This book is odd compared to the other secret projects, as we have three illustrators, not one. We wanted to try out some new people and found some

individuals who worked well for this specific novel. Thank you to all of them for their amazing work. These projects became extra special because of their involvement. Ernanda Souza did the endpapers, full-color illustrations, and concept art. She really did a great job and was awesome to work with. Nabetse Zitro did our interior drawings, joining us again after the incredible work he did on the new comic pages in the *White Sand* graphic novel omnibus. And kudriaken did our spectacular cover illustration.

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From here, let's go to the departments at Dragonsteel. I have the best team in the business, and they all put a lot of work into these secret projects.

Isaac StÙart is our vice president of Creative Development. His team includes Ben McSweeney (who did great concept work to keep the vision of the project cohesive), Rachael Lynn Buchanan (who did a lot of heavy lifting helping Isaac work with the artists, choosing scenes to illustrate, and keeping track of details), Jennifer Neal, Hayley Lazo, Priscilla Spencer, and Anna Earley.

The Instructional Peter Ahlstrom is our vice president of Editorial. His team includes Karen Ahlstrom, Kristy S. Gilbert, Jennie Stevens (our in-house editor of this book), Betsey Ahlstrom, and Emily Shaw-Higham. Kristy Kugler did the copyedit.

The Narrative department is just Dan Wells, who is also its VP. But we let him boss Ben around to make up for it.

Our COO is Emily Sanderson, and the Operations team includes Matt "Matt" Hatch, Emma Tan-Stoker, Jane Horne, Kathleen Dorsey Sanderson, Makena Saluone, Hazel Cummings, and Becky Wilson.

Adam Horne, a.k.a. the Grand Master of Corgis, is our vice president of Publicity and Marketing. His team includes Jeremy Palmer, Taylor D. Hatch, and Octavia Escamilla.

Kara Stewart is our vice president of Merchandising, Events, and making sure you all get your boxes of stuff. Her team includes Emma Tan-Stoker, Christi Jacobsen, Kellyn Neumann, Lex Willhite, Mem Grange, Michael Bateman, Joy Allen, Ally Reep, Richard Rubert, Katy Ives, Brett Moore, Dallin Holden, Daniel Phipps, Jacob Chrisman, Alex Lyon, Matt Hampton, Camilla Cutler, Quinton Martin, Esther Grange, Logan Reep, Laura

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My writing group consists of Emily Sanderson, Kathleen Dorsey Sanderson, Peter Ahlstrom, Karen Ahlstrom, Darci Stone, Eric James Stone, Alan Layton, Ethan Skarstedt, Ben Olsen, and Dan Wells.

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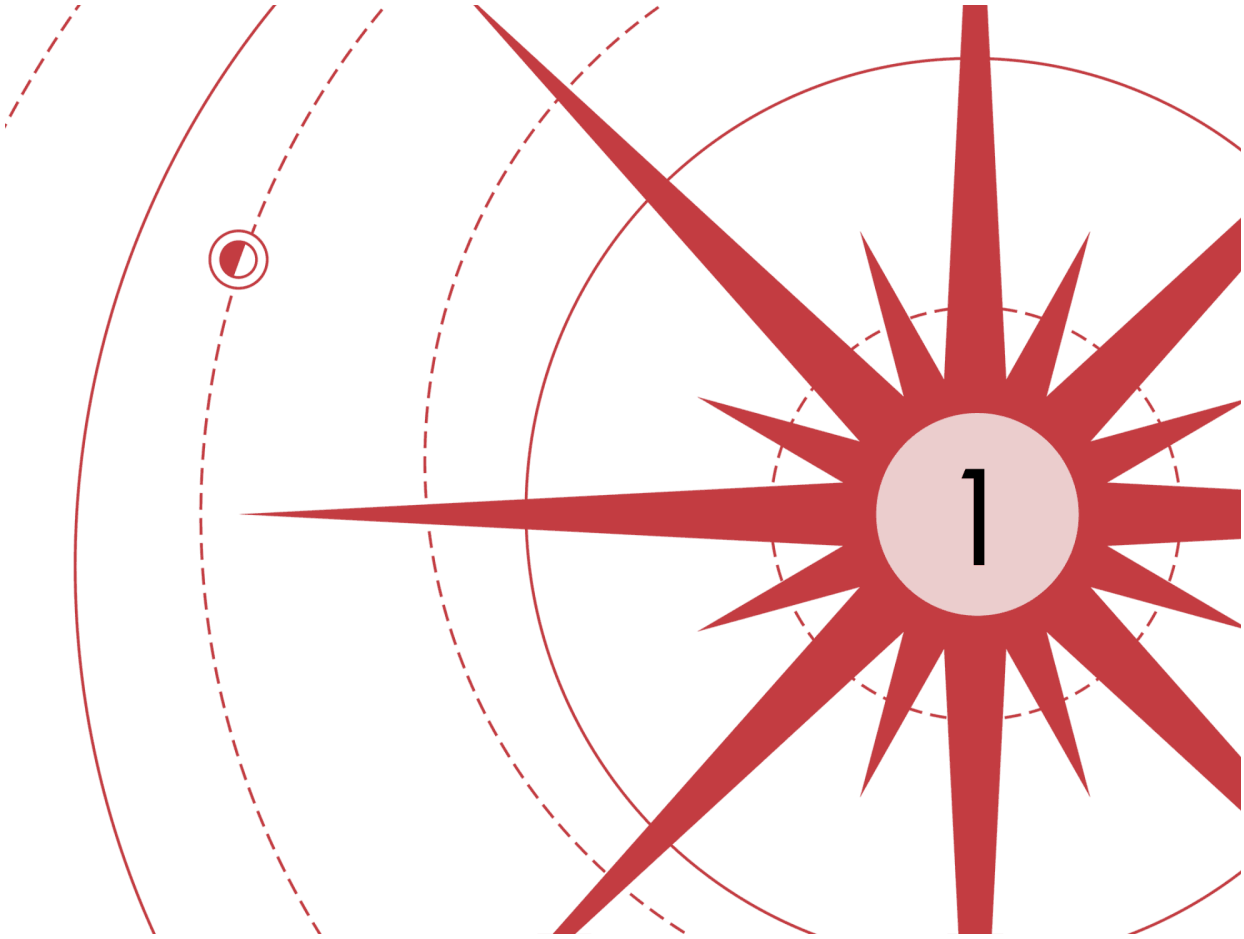
As this is the last book of the Secret Projects Kickstarter, I wanted to take one final opportunity to thank you all. I might have written the books, but you created the *event* that they became. You made this year so very special. After you've read the book, see the postscript for more.

Brandon Sanderson



NOMAD WOKE UP among the condemned.

He blinked, his right cheek in the dirt. Then he focused on the incongruous sight of a plant growing in fast-motion before his eyes. Was he dreaming? The fragile sprout quivered and twisted, heaving up from the earth. It seemed to stretch with joy, its seedpods parting like arms after a deep sleep. A stalk emerged from the center, testing the air like a serpent's tongue. Then it stretched left toward the dim light shining from that direction.

Nomad groaned and lifted his head, mind fuzzy, muscles sore. Where had he Skipped to this time? And would it be far enough away to hide from the Night Brigade?

Of course it wouldn't be. No place could hide him from them. He had to keep moving. Had to…

Storms. It felt good to lie here. Couldn't he just rest for a while? Stop running for once?

Rough hands grabbed him from behind and hauled him to his knees, jolting him from his stupor. He became more aware of his surroundings: the shouting, the groaning. Sounds he'd been oblivious to in his post-Skip grogginess.

The people here, including the man who grabbed him, wore unfamiliar clothing. Long trousers, sleeves with tight cuffs, shirts with high collars all the way up to the chin. The man shook him, barking at Nomad in a language he didn't understand.

"Trans…translation?" Nomad croaked.

Sorry, a deep, monotone voice said in his head. *We don't have enough Investiture for that.*

Right. He'd barely reached the threshold for his last Skip, which would leave him nearly drained. His abilities relied on reaching or maintaining certain thresholds of Investiture, the mystical power source that fueled extraordinary events on most planets he visited.

"How much?" he croaked. "How much do we have left?"

Around fifteen hundred BEUs. So, in other words, under eight percent Skip capacity.

Damnation. As he'd worried, the cost to come here had left him destitute. As long as he maintained certain levels, his body could do exceptional things. Each cost a tiny bit of Investiture, but that cost was minimal—so long as he kept his thresholds.

Once he had over two thousand Breath Equivalent Units, he could play with his Connection. Then he could Connect to the planet using his skills and speak the local language. Which meant Nomad wouldn't be able to speak to the locals until he found a power source to absorb.

He winced at the breath of the shouting man. He wore a hat with a wide brim, tied under the chin, and thick gloves. It was dim out, though a burning corona lit the horizon. Just before dawn, Nomad guessed. And even by that light, sprouts were growing all across this field. Those plants…their movements reminded him of home—a place without soil, but with plants that were so much more vigorous than on other worlds.

These weren't the same, though. They didn't dodge to avoid being stepped on. These plants were merely growing quickly. Why?

Nearby, people wearing long white coats pounded stakes into the ground—then others chained down people who didn't have those coats. Both groups had a variety of skin tones and wore similar clothing.

Nomad couldn't understand the words anyone was shouting, but he recognized the bearing of the condemned. The cries of despair from some, the pleading tones of others, the abject resignation in most as they were chained to the ground.

This was an execution.

The man holding Nomad shouted at him again, glaring through eyes a watery blue. Nomad just shook his head. That breath could have wilted flowers. The man's companion—dressed in one of those long white coats—gestured to Nomad, arguing. Soon his two captors made a decision. One grabbed a set of manacles off his belt, moving to cuff Nomad.

"Yeah," Nomad said, "I don't think so." He grabbed the man's wrist, preparing to throw him and trip the other man.

But Nomad's muscles locked up—like a machine that had run out of oil. He stiffened in place, and the men pulled away from him, surprised by his sudden outburst.

Nomad's muscles unlocked, and he stretched his arms, feeling a sudden, sharp pain. "Damnation!" His Torment was getting worse. He glanced at his frightened captors. At least they didn't seem to be armed.

A figure emerged from the crowd. Everyone else was swathed in clothing—male or female, they showed skin only on their faces. But this newcomer was bare chested—wearing a diaphanous robe split at the front—and had on thick black trousers. He was the sole person on the field not wearing gloves, though he did wear a pair of golden bracers on his forearms.

He was also missing most of his chest.

Much of the pectorals, rib cage, and heart had been *dug out*—burned away, leaving the remaining skin seared and blackened. Inside the cavity, the man's heart had been replaced by a glimmering ember. It pulsed red when wind stoked it—as did similar pinpricks of crimson light among the char. Black burn marks radiated from the hole across the man's skin, extending as far as a few specks on his face, which occasionally glittered with their own much smaller sparks. It was like the man had been strapped to a jet engine as it ignited—somehow leaving him not only alive, but perpetually *burning*.

"Don't suppose," Nomad said, "you fellows are the type who enjoy a comical blunder made by a newcomer to your culture?" He stood and raised his hands in a nonthreatening way, ignoring the instincts that told him—as always—that he needed to *run*.

The ember man pulled a large bat off his back. Like a police baton, but more begrudging in its nonlethality.

“Didn’t think so,” Nomad said, backing up. A few of the chained people watched him with the strange, yet familiar, hope of a prisoner—happy that someone *else* was drawing attention.

The ember man came for him, supernaturally quick, his heart light flaring. He was Invested. Wonderful.

Nomad barely dodged a mighty blow.

“I need a weapon, Aux!” Nomad snapped.

Well, summon one then, my dear squire, said the voice in his head. *I’m not holding you back.*

Nomad grunted, diving through a tall patch of grass that had sprung up in the minutes since he’d woken. He tried to make a weapon appear, but nothing happened.

It’s your Torment, the knight helpfully observes to his moderately capable squire. It has grown strong enough to deny you weapons. As usual, Aux’s voice was completely monotone. He was self-conscious about that, hence the added commentary.

Nomad dodged again as the ember man slammed his baton down in another near miss—making the ground tremble at the impact. Storms. That light was getting brighter. Covering the entire horizon in a way that felt too even. How…how large *was* the sun on this planet?

“I thought,” Nomad shouted, “that my oaths overrode that aspect of the Torment!”

I’m sorry, Nomad. But what *oaths?*

The ember man prepared another swing, and Nomad took a deep breath, then ducked the attack and bodychecked the man. As soon as he went in for the hit, though, his body locked up again.

Yes, I see, the knight muses with a conversational tone. Your Torment now attempts to prevent even minor physical altercations.

He couldn't so much as *tackle* someone? It *was* getting bad. The ember man hit Nomad across the face, throwing him to the ground. Nomad managed to roll and avoid the baton and, with a groan, heaved himself to his feet.

The baton came in again, and by instinct, Nomad put up both hands—catching it. Stopping the swing cold.

The ember man's eyes widened. Nearby, several of the prisoners called out. Heads turned. Seemed like people around here weren't accustomed to the sight of a person going toe-to-toe with one of these Invested warriors. The ember man's eyes widened further as—with teeth gritted—Nomad stepped forward and shoved him off balance, sending him stumbling backward.

Behind the strange warrior, blazing light warped the molten horizon, bringing with it a sudden, blasting heat. Around them, the plants that had grown so rapidly began wilting. The lines of chained people whimpered and screamed.

Run, a part of Nomad shouted. *Run!*

It's what he did.

It was all he knew these days.

But as he turned to dash away, *another* ember man behind him prepared to swing. Nomad tried to catch this blow too, but his storming body locked up *again*.

"Oh, come *on*!" he shouted as the baton clobbered him in the side. He stumbled. The ember man decked him across the face with a powerful fist, sending him to the dirt again.

Nomad gasped, groaning, feeling gritty soil and rocks on his skin. And heat. Terrible, bewildering heat from the horizon, still building in intensity.

Both ember men turned away, and the first thumbed over his shoulder at Nomad. The two timid officers in the white coats hastened over and—while Nomad was in a daze of pain and frustration—manacled his hands together. They appeared to contemplate pounding a spike into the earth and pinning him there, but rightly guessed that a man who could catch the bat of an Invested warrior could rip it out. Instead they hauled him over to a ring that had been affixed to a section of stone, locking him there.

Nomad fell to his knees in the line of prisoners, sweat dripping from his brow as the heat increased. His instincts screamed at him to run.

Yet another piece of him…simply wanted to be done. How long had the chase lasted? How long had it been since he'd stood proud?

Maybe I'll just let it end, he thought. *A mercy killing. Like a man mortally wounded on the battlefield.*

He slumped, the soreness in his side pulsing, though he doubted anything was broken. So long as he maintained around five percent Skip capacity—around a thousand BEUs—his body would be more powerful, more endurant. Where others broke, he bruised. Fire that would sear others only singed him.

Healing engaged, the hero says with a confident voice to his humiliated valet. You're under ten percent Skip capacity, so your healing won't be as efficient as you're used to.

At times he wondered if the enhancements he bore were a blessing or another part of the Torment. The light increased with the heat, becoming blinding. That smoke in the distance…was that the *ground* catching fire? From the light of the sun?

Damnation. Damnation *itself* was rising over the horizon.

That light, Aux said. *It's far too powerful for ordinary sunlight—at least on any habitable planet.*

"Think the light is Invested?" Nomad whispered. "Like on Taldain?"

A plausible theory, the knight says with a musing curiosity.

"Think you can absorb it?"

Possibly. We'll likely soon see…

If he could absorb enough, he could Skip right off this planet and put even more space between himself and the Night Brigade. Wouldn't that be nice for once? To have a head start? Still, something about the intensity of that light daunted Nomad. Worried him. He stared at it as the nearby officers—including the ember men—finished locking down the prisoners. Once done, they ran to a line of machines. Long and thin, they had six seats each. Open to the air, with a windshield in front and controls for the front left operator.

They kind of looked like…six-seater hovercycles? An odd construction, but he wasn't sure what else to call them. You apparently straddled each seat—there was an opening for the inner leg—though they were all locked together along a central fuselage with no outer wall or door. Regardless, he wasn't surprised when fires blasted underneath the first of these, raising it in the air a half dozen feet or so.

What did it matter? He turned toward the ever-increasing light as the plants—vibrant only minutes ago—browned and withered. He thought he

could hear the roar of flames in the distance as the full-intensity sunlight advanced, like the front of a once-familiar storm.

He had a guess, watching the strength of that light, that he wouldn't be able to absorb it. No more than a common cord and plug could handle the raw output of a nuclear reactor. This was something incredible, a force that would fry him before he could make use of its power.

Uh, Nomad, Aux said in his monotone voice. *I get the feeling that trying to absorb and use Investiture from* that *is going to be like trying to pick out a snowflake from an avalanche. I…don't think we should let it hit you.*

"It will kill me if it does…" Nomad whispered.

Is that…what you want?

No.

No, even though he hated much about his life, he *didn't* want to die. Even though each day he became something more feral…well, feral things knew to struggle for life.

A sudden frantic desperation struck Nomad. He began pulling and flailing against the chains. The second of the four hovercycles took off, and he knew—from the speed of the advancing sunlight—that they were his only hope of escape. He screamed, voice ragged, straining against the steel, stretching it—but unable to pull it free.

"Aux!" he shouted. "I need a Blade! Transform!"

I'm not the one preventing that, Nomad.

"That light is going to kill us!"

Point: it is going to kill you, my poor valet. I am already dead.

Nomad yelled something primal as the third hovercycle took off, though the last one was having troubles. Perhaps he—

Wait.

"Weapons are forbidden to me. What about tools?"

Why would they *be forbidden to you?*

Nomad was an idiot! Auxiliary was a shapeshifting metal tool that, in this case, he could manifest physically as a crowbar. It formed in his hands as if from white mist, appearing out of nothing. Nomad hooked it into the ring on the boulder, then threw his weight against it.

SNAP.

He lurched free, hands still manacled, but with two feet of slack between them. He stumbled to his feet and dashed toward the last of the hovercycles as the fires finally ignited underneath it.

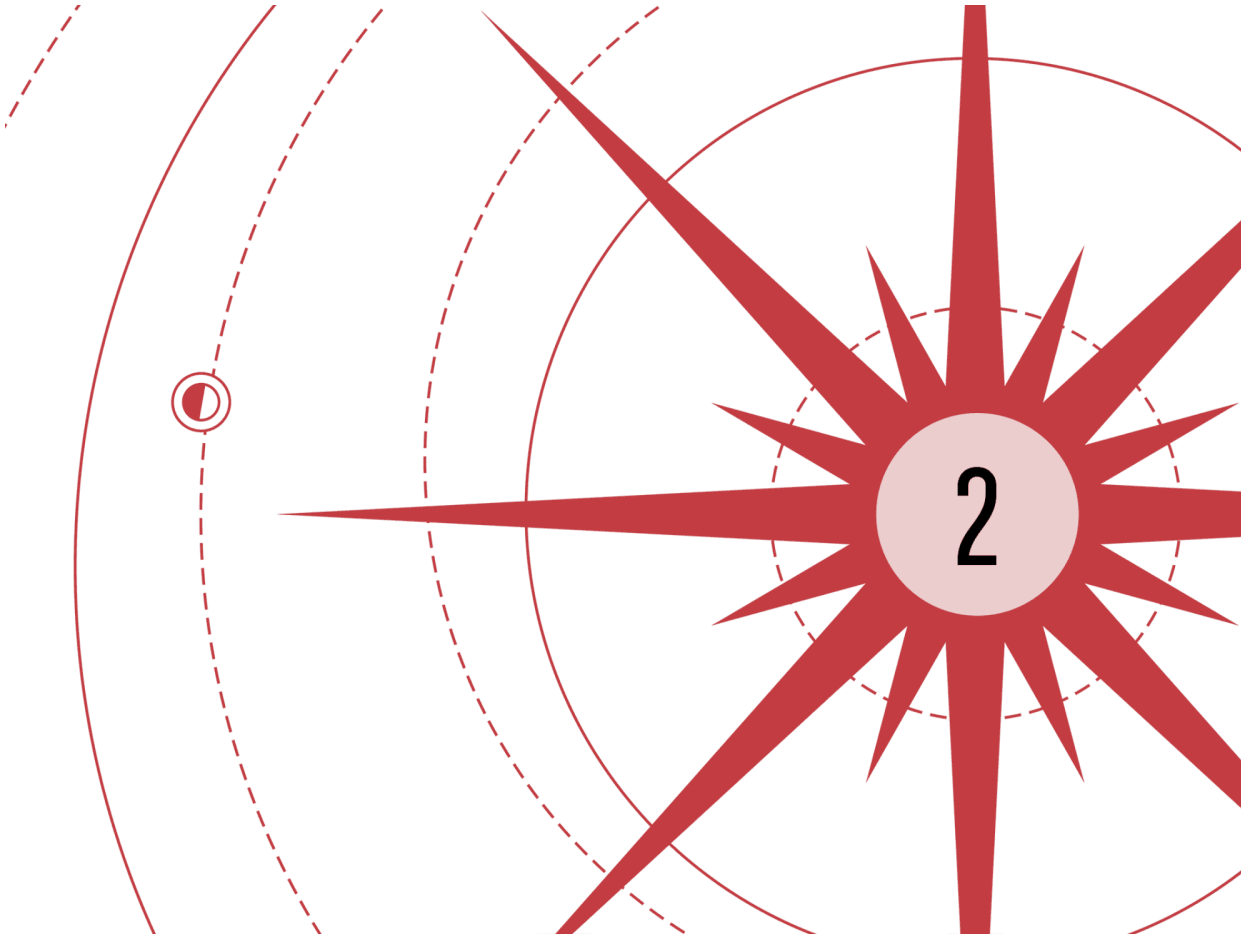
He summoned Auxiliary as a hook and chain, which he immediately hurled at the cycle. It struck just as the machine took off. At Nomad's command, once Auxiliary caught it, the hook fuzzed briefly and sealed as a solid ring around a protrusion on the back of the vehicle. The other end of the chain locked onto Nomad's manacles.

The sunlight reached him. An incredible, intense, burning light. Prisoners burst into flame, screaming.

Oh, storms, the knight shouts.

In that moment, the slack on the chain pulled tight. Nomad was yanked out of the sunlight, his skin screaming in agony, his clothing aflame.

He was dragged away from certain death. But toward what, he had no idea.



NOMAD SLAMMED TO the ground side-first, dragged with frightening speed after the hovercycle.

Your healing is engaged, Aux said. *And your body has adjusted to the local environment's lower air pressure. But, Nomad, you've got so little Investiture left. Try not to get too beat up by this next part, all right?*

Even as Aux said it, Nomad ripped through barriers of withered plants and smashed repeatedly against rocks, dirt grinding into his skin. But again, Nomad was built of strong stuff. A base level of Investiture toughened him. Though healing would use Investiture up faster than other abilities, so long as he kept a minimum baseline, he might not need much healing.

He wasn't immortal. Most advanced weapons would be instantly lethal to him—storms, even many primitive ones could kill him if used persistently, running him out of Investiture. However, where an ordinary man's arms would have been twisted from their sockets—their skin flayed as plant

detritus became like razors in the high speed—he stayed together. And even managed to heal from the burns.

Down to six percent, Aux informed him. *That wasn't too bad, all things considered. But…did you feel that heat? It was unreal. There was Investiture involved for sure, but I couldn't grab any of it. Opening myself up to absorb that would have destroyed me. We will need a safer way to harvest it.*

Nomad grunted as he crashed into the ground again. With effort, he managed to turn himself to put the brunt of the further damage on his thigh and shoulder. Though the wind put out the flames on his clothing, the force of slamming against things ripped the remnants of his jacket and shirt away.

His skin held, though. He didn't mind the rough treatment of his escape. It was better than being left in that sunlight.

He closed his eyes, trying to banish a greater pain. The memory of the unfortunate prisoners' screams when the sunrise hit them, turning them to ash in seconds. He was sure some of them had been calling to him for help.

Once, he'd have been unable to ignore that. But millions, perhaps billions, of people died each day around the cosmere. He couldn't stop that. He could barely keep *himself* alive.

It hurt regardless. Even after years of torment, he still hated watching people die.

He tucked in his chin, protecting his face from the jolting chaos of being hauled across the rough surface of this harsh world. He could see the sky darkening. The fearsome sunlight vanished beneath the horizon as if it were dusk, though Nomad was the one moving. The hovercycle was fast enough to round the planet ahead of the rising sun, staying out of the dawn's burning clutches.

This planet must have a slow rotation, the hero observes to his erratic valet. Note how these vehicles can easily outrun the sun.

Ahead, opposite the sun, an enormous planetary ring rose in the sky—a broad arc that reflected the sunlight.

Nomad had little opportunity to enjoy the return to safe twilight. Several of the people on the cycle tried to pry loose his chain, but at such speeds—and with him as a weight on the end—that would be difficult even if he hadn't sealed the loop. He wondered if perhaps they'd stop to deal with him, but they kept on flying after the other cycles, never more than a few feet off the ground.

Eventually they slowed, then stopped. Nomad came to rest in a patch of wet soil, appreciating the sensation of something soft. He groaned and

flopped over, trousers a mess of rips and tatters, freshly healed skin beaten and battered, hands still manacled. After a moment of agony—spent trying to appreciate the fact that at least no new pains were being added—he turned his head to see why they'd stopped.

He could see no reason. Perhaps it was just for the drivers to get their bearings—because after a short conversation, the hovercycles took off again. This time, they rose higher in the air, leaving Nomad to dangle. This was better, at least, because as they flew, he didn't get slammed into anything. He assumed they stayed low earlier because they hadn't wanted to risk rising too high into the sunlight.

They flew for what felt like an hour until they finally reached something interesting: a floating city. It moved through the landscape, an enormous plate, lifted by the thrust of hundreds of engines burning underneath it. Nomad had been on flying cities before, including one on a planet near his homeworld, but rarely had he seen one so…ramshackle. A motley collection of single-story buildings, like an enormous slum, somehow raised up above the ground—but only thirty or forty feet. Indeed, it seemed like even getting to that modest height was straining the city's engines, their lift barely enough to clear the landscape's obstacles.

This wasn't some soaring metropolis of technological splendor. It was a desperate exercise in survival. He looked back into the distance, where the light on the horizon had faded to invisibility. Yet he knew the sun was there. Looming. Like the date of your execution.

"You have to remain ahead of it, don't you?" he whispered. "You live in the shadows because the sun here will kill you."

Storms. An entire society that had to keep moving, outrunning the sun itself? The implications of it set his mind working, and old training—the man he'd once been—started to worm through the corpse he'd become. Why wasn't the weather on this planet, even in the darkness, a tempest? If the sun was superheating one side all the time, you'd never be able to survive on the other side. That they could was evident, so he was missing something.

How did they feed themselves? What fuel powered those engines, and how did they possibly have time to mine or drill for it while moving? And speaking of mines, why not live in caves? They obviously had metal to spare. They'd used some to chain those poor sods to the ground.

He'd always been inquisitive. Even after he'd become a soldier—pointedly turning away from the life of a scholar—he'd asked questions. Now they teased him until he beat them back with a firm hand. Only one

mattered. Would the power source of those engines be enough to fuel his next Skip and get him off this planet before the Night Brigade found him?

The hovercycle roared, climbing toward the city. He dangled under the last of the four, weighing it down, the engines underneath throwing fire his direction and heating his chain. Auxiliary could handle it, fortunately. Curiously this small rise in elevation made Nomad's ears pop.

Once the cycles reached the surface level of the city, they didn't park in the conventional way. They moved in sideways and locked into the city's edge, their engines remaining on, adding their lift to that of the main engines.

Nomad dangled by his hands and chain, his pains fading as he healed once again, though this healing was minimal compared to what he'd needed to recover from that sunlight. From this vantage, he could see lumps of barren hills and muddy pits below, like sludge and moors. The city had left a wide trail of burned, dried-out dirt behind it. Obviously, with a scar like that to follow, it was easy for those flying cycles to track their way home.

He was surprised how well he could see. He blinked, sweat and muddy water dripping into his eyes, and looked up at that ring again. Like most, it was actually a collection of rings. Brilliant, blue and gold, circling the planet—sweeping high in the air, extending as if into infinity. They pointed toward the sun, tipped at a slight angle, reflecting sunlight down onto the surface. Now that he could study it, a part of him acknowledged how stunning the sight was. He'd visited tens of planets and had never seen anything so stoically magnificent. Mud and fire below, but in the air…that was majesty. This was a planet that wore a crown.

His chain shook as someone began to haul him upward. Soon he was grabbed by his arms and heaved up onto the metal surface of the city, into a crooked street lined with squat buildings. A small crowd chattered and gestured at him. Ignoring them, he focused instead on the five distinctive figures behind them—people with embers in their chests.

They stood with heads bowed, eyes closed—embers having cooled. Two were women, he thought, though the fire that consumed their chests had left no semblance of breasts, only that hole stretching two handspans wide, bits of the ribs poking through the charred skin. Embers in place of hearts.

The rest of the people were dressed as he'd seen below: high collars that reached all the way to the chin, swathed in clothing, each wearing gloves. Several wore the white coats, formal, with open fronts but insignias on the shoulders. Officers or officials. The rest wore muted colors and seemed to be

civilians. Some of the women wore skirts, though many preferred long, skirtlike jackets, their fronts open to reveal trousers underneath. Many—both men and women—wore hats with wide brims. Why did they wear those when there was barely any light?

Don't think about it, he told himself, exhausted. *Who cares? You're not going to be here long enough to learn anything about their culture.*

Many had pale skin, though nearly as many had darker skin like his. A smaller number had a variety of shades between. The crowd soon stilled, then lowered their eyes and backed away, parting to make way for some newcomer. Nomad settled back on his heels, breathing in and out deeply. The newcomer proved to be a tall man in a black coat—with eyes that glowed.

They simmered a deep red color, as if lit from behind. The effect reminded Nomad of something from his past, long ago—but this was less like the red eyes of a corrupted soul, and more like something that was burning inside the man. His black coat glowed too, along the edges, in a similar red-orange shade. Nomad thought he had one of those embers in his chest as well, though that was covered with thin clothing. It didn't seem to have sunk as deeply into the skin as the others, as he still had the shape of his pectorals.

His glow was mimicked by many of the buildings, the rims of walls glowing as if by firelight. Like the city had recently been aflame, and these were its ashes.

The man with the glowing eyes raised a thick gloved hand to quiet the crowd. He took in Nomad, then nodded to two officers and pointed, barking an order. The officers fell over themselves to obey, scrambling to undo Nomad's manacles.

Nervous, they backed away as soon as the manacles were off. Nomad rose to his feet, making many of the civilians gasp, but didn't make any sudden moves. Because, storms, he was tired. He let out a long sigh, pains having become aches. He told Auxiliary to stay in place as a chain; he didn't want them to realize he had access to a shape-changing tool.

The man with the glowing eyes barked something at him, voice harsh.

Nomad shook his head.

Glowing Eyes repeated his question, louder, slower, angrier.

"I don't speak your tongue," Nomad said hoarsely. "Give me a power source, like one from the engines of those cycles. If I absorb that, it might be enough."

That depended on what they were using as fuel—but the way they kept an entire city floating, he doubted their power source was conventional. The idea of fueling a city like this with coal was laughable. They'd be using some kind of Invested material, perhaps charged in that sunlight.

The leader, finally realizing that Nomad wasn't going to respond, raised his hand to the side—then carefully pulled off his glove, one finger at a time. People gasped, though the move revealed only an ordinary, if pale, hand.

The man stepped up to Nomad and seized him by the face.

Nothing happened.

The man seemed surprised by this. He shifted his grip.

"If you lean in for a kiss," Nomad muttered, "I'm going to bite your storming lip off."

It felt good to be able to joke like that. His distant, former master would be proud of him. In his youth, Nomad had been far too serious and rarely allowed himself levity. More because he'd been too embarrassed and frightened by the idea of possibly saying something cringeworthy.

Get dragged through the dirt enough times—get beaten to within an inch of your life, to the point where you barely remembered your own name—well, that did wonders for your sense of humor. All you had left at that point was to laugh at the joke you had become.

The onlookers were *really* amazed by the fact that nothing happened when Glowing Eyes touched him. The man took Nomad one final time by the chin, then let go and wiped his hand on his coat before replacing his glove, his eyes—like the burning light of firemoss—illuminating the front brim of his hat and the too-smooth features of his face. He might have been fifty, but it was hard to tell, as he didn't have a single wrinkle. Seemed there were advantages to living in perpetual twilight.

One of the officers from before stepped up and gestured at Nomad, speaking in hushed tones. He looked incredulous, pointing toward the horizon.

Another of the officers nodded, staring at Nomad. "Sess Nassith Tor," he whispered.

Curious, the knight says. I almost understood that. It's very similar to another language I'm still faintly Connected to.

"Any idea which one?" Nomad growled.

No. But…I think…Sess Nassith Tor… It means something like… One Who Escaped the Sun.

Others behind repeated the phrase, taking it up, until Glowing Eyes roared at them. He looked back at Nomad, then kicked him square in the chest. It hurt, particularly in the state Nomad was in. This man was definitely Invested, to deliver so strong a kick.

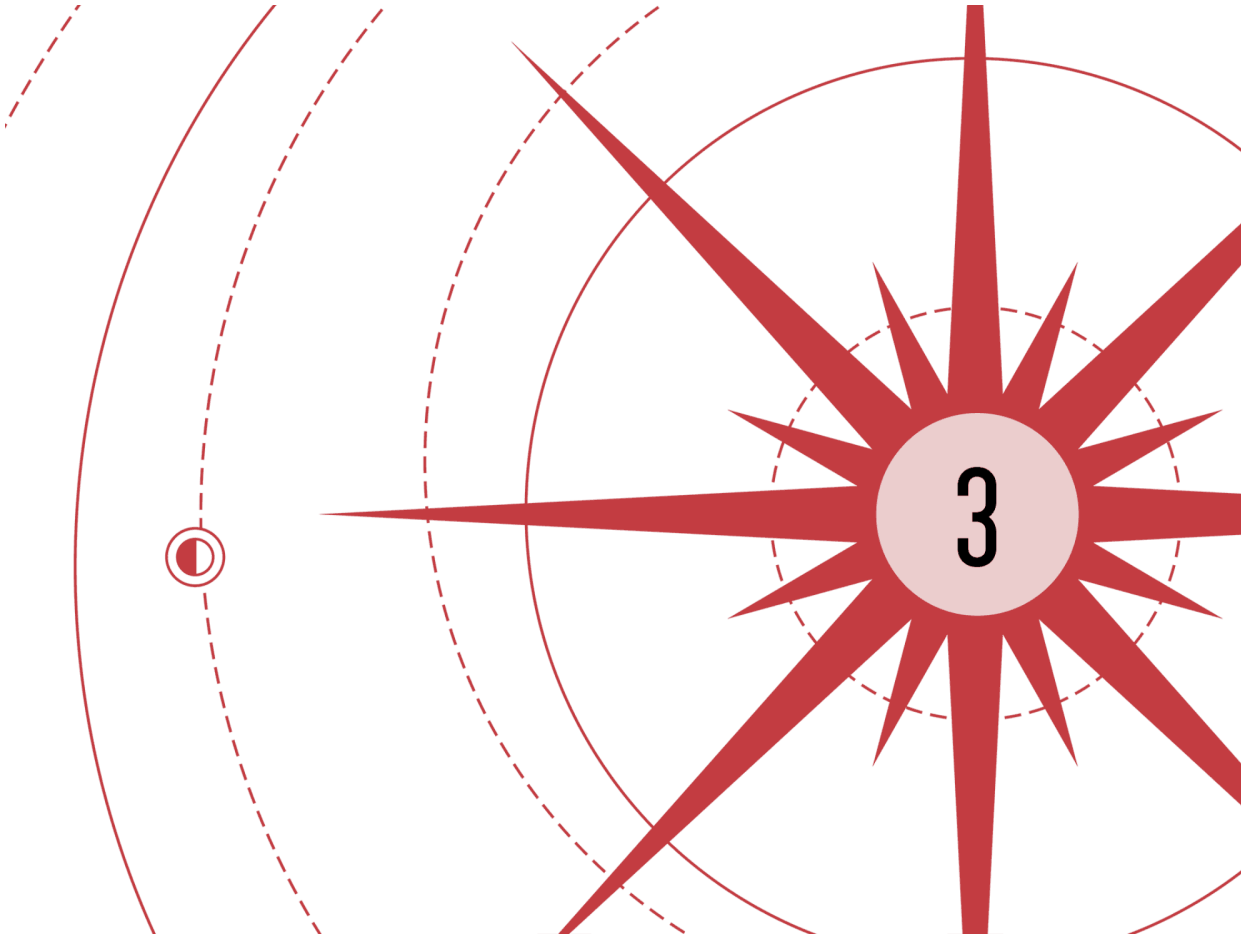
Nomad grunted and bent over, gasping for breath. The man seized him, then smiled, now realizing that Nomad wouldn't fight back. The man *enjoyed* that idea. He tossed Nomad to the side, then kicked him in the chest again, his smile broadening.

Nomad would have loved to rip that smile off with some skin attached. But since fighting back would make him freeze, the best thing to do was to play docile.

Glowing Eyes gestured to Nomad. "*Kor* Sess Nassith Tor," he said with a sneer, then kicked Nomad again for good measure.

A few officers scrambled forward and grabbed him under the arms to drag him off. He found himself hoping for a nice cell—someplace cold and hard, yes, but at least he could sleep and forget who he was for a few hours.

Such modest hopes were shattered as the city started to break apart.



THE ENTIRE CITY vibrated, and the buildings swayed sickeningly. Cracks appeared in the metal street beneath Nomad, but as he began to panic, his captors calmly stepped across the cracks and pulled him into a building.

The city shook and split. It…it wasn't breaking. It was *disassembling*. It shattered into hundreds of pieces, each chunk rising on its own jets, each with a single building on it. Each chunk was a *ship*.

Earlier, he'd seen how the hovercycles had locked into place along the edge, adding their thrust to the city. In a discomfiting moment, he now realized that *every* piece of the platform was similar. It wasn't one big flying city; instead it had been hundreds of ships joined together.

Most of them were modest in size—the single-family-home version of a hovership. Many were smaller than that, built like tugboats, with wide decks and a cab on top. A few were larger, carrying wide buildings suitable for meeting halls or warehouses. They were all bounded with wide, flat decks that could be joined together to make the streets. As each ship flew off,

railings rose at the decks' edges and walls unfolded to reveal windshields and control cabs.

He got the impression that this city hadn't been built as a cohesive whole that could also be disassembled—rather, this was a hodgepodge of individual vehicles that could work together. That helped explain the city's eclectic quality. The place was like a caravan that, for the sake of convenience or defense, could assemble its pieces into a temporary town.

The fact that it worked so well together was remarkable. Responding to shouts and instructions Nomad couldn't understand, many of the ships flew off into the distance, engaged in some activity. Nomad squinted and saw that several were scattering some substance onto the ground.

Seeds, he realized. *They're spreading seeds.* A puzzle piece of this bizarre world fell into place. The Invested sunlight explained the fast-growing plants, maturing almost instantly as they absorbed the potent predawn light. He'd already proven he couldn't siphon off that energy for himself, but the plants whispered there was a way—even if it was out of his reach.

Regardless, this society had a harvest *every day*. They must sow crops, then reap them mere hours later, before fleeing into the darkness. Was that light from the rings sufficient, or did they need to get in close, dare the edge of the deadly sunlight?

He had to fight back his curiosity with a bludgeon.

You make, he thought at himself, *a terrible cynic.*

The ship he was on didn't follow those sowing the crops; it joined another group of ships that descended to the ground. Some here had buildings of two or three stories, the largest he had seen. They landed in a wide ring on the muddy ground. His ship came down and locked in next to an overbearing one with tiers of balconies on the front.

Glowing Eyes stepped up onto one of these and settled into a seat. Nomad inspected the muddy ring as lesser ships locked in on top of one another, creating a tiered structure four or five ships tall. He felt a sinking feeling as he recognized this setup. It was an arena. While the farmers went out to work, the privileged gathered on the front decks of their ships to enjoy some kind of show.

He groaned as his captors affixed a golden set of bracers to his forearms, just like the ones the ember people wore. Once these were in place, his captors hauled him to the front deck of their ship. When he tried to resist—instinctively taking a swing at one—he locked up. Then they easily tossed him down some twelve feet into a patch of rancid, waterlogged earth.

It wasn't the first arena he'd been in, but as he pulled his face from the muck, he decided it was certainly the dirtiest. Several larger vessels that resembled shipping containers landed and opened their front doors. Officials in white coats forced out three tens or so people in ragged clothing, herding them into the ring. Nomad sighed, pulling himself to his feet, trying to ignore the stench of the mud. Considering what he'd been through the last few weeks, he figured the mud was probably trying to do him the same favor.

The prisoners forced into the ring did *not* seem like the fighting type. The poor souls looked almost as tattered and worn as he felt. They stumbled and tripped as they tried to move through the thick sludge, which stained their clothing.

No weapons were offered. So, Nomad thought, not a gladiatorial arena. They weren't here to fight…but they might be here to die. Indeed, another door opened, and three of the ember people strode out, carrying weapons. A ship floated down—its engines' heat uncomfortable—and dropped several large metal crates, each landing in the mud with a wet squelch. Obstacles, ranging in size.

The ember people came in running. The crowd cheered. The unarmed peasants scattered like hogs before a whitespine, frantic.

Delightful.

Nomad dashed through the mud. It only came up to his ankles, but it was treacherously slick, and stuck to his feet with surprising suction. He skidded toward one of the larger boxes, fully eight feet tall, and heaved himself up onto it by his fingertips.

He figured that if he made himself the most difficult target of the bunch, the ember people would chase easier prey first. That might give him time to figure some storming way out of this situation. But as soon as he got onto the box, a pair of black-gloved hands appeared, and a figure climbed up after him. Ember burning at the center of her heart, light green eyes fixed solely on him, her lips snarling. She had short black hair streaked with silver, and her left cheek was scored by a vein of blackness with a glowing line down its center.

While the other two ember people carried whips, this one held a long, wicked machete. Damnation. Why come after him? Nomad glanced toward the throne above where Glowing Eyes watched with interest.

Do you think, the knight asks his faithful squire, he wants to see what you can do?

“No,” Nomad whispered, backing away from the ember woman. “Remember the anger the leader displayed? The others treated me with some reverence for escaping the sun. He hated that.”

This wasn’t a test. Glowing Eyes wanted Nomad to be killed in public. Wanted him humiliated and defeated for everyone to see.

The ember woman came in swinging at Nomad, so he turned and leaped from the top of the enormous crate toward a smaller one. Here, he rolled purposefully off into the mud, pretending to scramble and find something there. As the ember woman came bounding down toward him, he heaved upward with a newly formed crowbar—deliberately *not* trying to hit the woman, but only to deflect the machete.

His body didn't lock up. So long as he was focused solely on defense, it seemed that he could resist. He shoved the ember woman aside, causing her to lose her balance and fall. She was up a second later, half her face covered in mud, glaring at him in a feral way. She didn't seem shocked by the sudden appearance of his weapon, and he'd tried to hide how he'd obtained it with his roll and fall. He hoped those watching above would assume that he dug it from the sludge somehow, that it was some piece of junk left by some other passing group.

Growling, the woman came scrambling for him. Behind, one of the poor peasants had been backed into a corner. An ember man grabbed her and thrust her aloft toward the sky with one arm. The crowd yelled in delight while the woman screamed in panic, though she didn't seem to have been hurt.

Nomad dodged once, twice, three times—narrowly avoiding machete blows from the ember woman, who moved with supernatural speed and grace. He had more trouble with the mud than she did. Despite his years on the run, soil still felt unnatural to him. It was wrong not to have solid stone underfoot.

As a second person was caught, Nomad blocked another blow from the machete—then barely stopped himself from hitting the woman with a backswing. Storms, it was hard to restrain himself. But he also couldn't dodge forever. Eventually those two other ember people would come for him.

He hit the woman's machete extra hard on the next clash, knocking the weapon free from her muddied hand. As she howled at him for that, he turned and ran, hooking his crowbar on his belt—covertly making a small loop to secure it. He didn't look to see if she followed, instead leaping onto a set of smaller boxes, then hurling himself up toward the tallest one, some fifteen feet high.

He barely grabbed the top, trying to haul himself up. Unfortunately his hands were slick with mud, and he started to fall.

Until a gloved hand caught him by the wrist. There was a man on top of the box already, one of the peasants—a tad heavyset, with pale skin, brown eyes, and a dimpled chin. With a determined expression, the man heaved, pulling Nomad the rest of the way up.

Nomad nodded to the grime-covered man, who gave him a gap-toothed smile in return. He glanced at Nomad's weapon, then asked a question, sounding confused.

Something about…you killing? Aux said. *I'm sorry. I can barely make out any of this. You need to get some Investiture.*

"Sorry, friend," Nomad said to the man. "Can't understand. But thank you."

The man joined him in watching the arena. Another captive was giving the ember people some trouble, dodging well, scrambling through the mud. It took two to eventually capture the poor woman.

The ember woman who had fought Nomad still ignored all other prey. She strode carefully around the large box, planning her ascent. As one more person was captured, the rest of the peasants gave up running, falling to their knees or leaning against walls, puffing in exhaustion.

The ones who had been captured were herded toward a different ship, screaming and crying—though notably not fighting back. Curious. From the way they acted, Nomad got the sense that—

"That bunch who were caught first are another set of condemned, Aux," he guessed. "To be left for the sun."

So… Auxiliary said in his head. *This was some elaborate game of tag? To determine who's next in line to be executed?*

"That's my best guess," Nomad said. "Look how relieved the others are not to have been caught."

Relieved, yes, the knight says with a morose sense of melancholy. But also…sad.

Auxiliary was right. Many of the survivors turned pained eyes toward the ones who had been taken. One man even screamed in a begging posture, falling to his knees, gesturing to offer himself instead. These captives all knew each other. The ones who had been taken were friends, maybe family members, of those who had survived.

Nomad's ally started to climb down, but the contest wasn't completely over. Not yet. Though the two other ember people had moved off after corralling the condemned, the third one—the woman with the silver in her hair—surged along the jumble of crates toward Nomad's perch.

She wouldn't stop until he'd been killed, he was certain of it. Well then. Time to see if he could trick his Torment. He waited tensely as the ember woman approached.

Nomad? Auxiliary asked. *What are you doing?*

"How heavy an object can you become?" he asked. "Without using up any of our BEUs?"

Every transformation I make uses a tiny bit of Investiture, but mostly not worth accounting. So I assume you're asking what I can become without dipping into and greatly draining our reserves. Under those restraints, I can become a mass of metal weighing about a hundred pounds or so. Why?

Nomad waited until the ember woman was nearly upon him—leaping for his box from the next perch over. At that moment, Nomad hurled himself toward her. He raised Auxiliary over his head—worrying that he'd have to reveal his secret—and created a barbell of the maximum weight. Nomad held it in front of him, as if poised to swing it.

In response, his Torment sensed he was trying to do harm. His arms locked up. But the ember woman still slammed right into the large chunk of metal, gasping as the two of them smashed together in midair.

He essentially became another deadweight. They both plummeted to the mud below, and he landed on top of her, his barbell hitting her in the chest, his elbow smashing her throat. The combined weight drove her into the soft ground.

When Nomad stumbled to his feet, she remained down—conscious but stunned. Her ember fluttered, like an eye blinking in exhaustion.

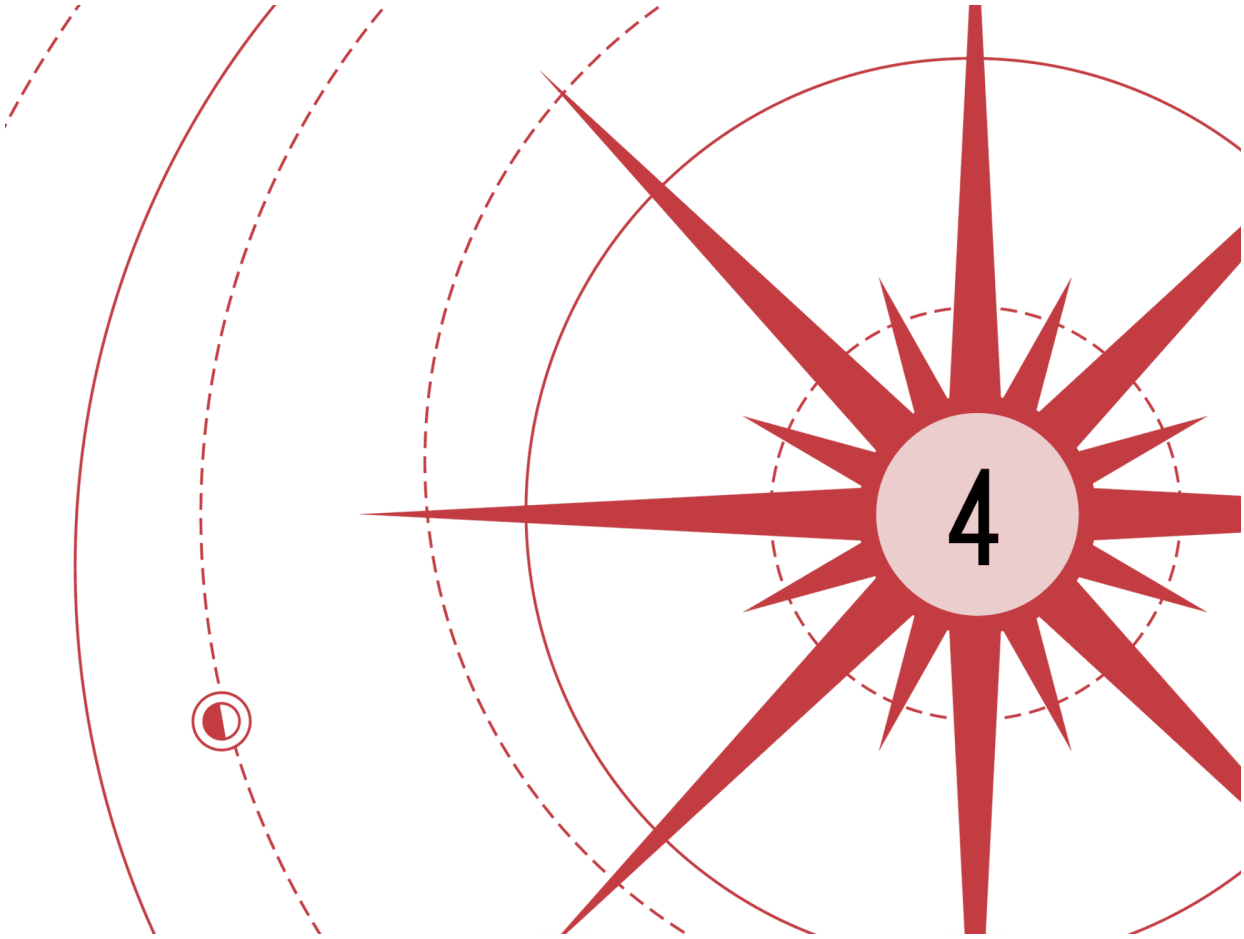
The crowd's yelling became a deathly silence.

"Doesn't happen often, does it?" Nomad shouted, turning toward Glowing Eyes, seated on his balcony at the head of the arena. "Someone defeating your soldiers. Why would it ever happen, though? These are Invested warriors, and you pit them against unarmed peasants!"

Glowing Eyes didn't reply, of course. Storms, Nomad hated bullies. He stepped forward, as if to challenge the man. As he did, however, a piercing shock of *cold* swept through him, originating at his wrists.

He looked down at the bracers he'd been given. They were leeching body heat right out of him, leaving him frozen, his muscles immobilized. He exhaled, his breath misting. He glared at Glowing Eyes—who held a device with buttons on it.

"B-bastard," Nomad said through chattering teeth. Then fell face-first into the mud, unconscious.



WHEN NOMAD WOKE this time, he found himself manacled to a wall. No…it was the outside of a boxy ship, one of those forming the arena. He'd been chained right up against the side of the thing, pulled spread-eagle on a flat piece of metal ten feet by ten feet.

It seemed he hadn't been out for very long, though it was impossible for him to be sure with no sun in the sky. Just those dramatic, sweeping rings.

He tried to move, but was held tightly against the ship at both his wrists and ankles. The rowdy crowd was still in place, though a small ship with a podium framed by four ornate columns had settled into the center of the arena. It was open to the air and looked like its only purpose was to be a speaking platform—the small ship's front deck giving a regal place for a leader to stand and address people. Glowing Eyes perched atop it, addressing the crowd, stoking their enthusiasm.

"Auxiliary," Nomad growled. "Did I miss anything relevant?"

They moved the boxes out of the way, Aux replied. *Then strapped you here. I'm trying to make sense of that speech, but I haven't caught more than a word or two. Some of this is about you. And…an "example"?*

"Lovely," Nomad said, struggling against the chains.

I don't think they realized or saw what you did with me, Auxiliary continued. *With the barbell, I mean. The angle was wrong. So I turned into a crowbar again when they pulled you out of the mud. They examined me, then tossed me aside, assuming I was nothing important. I'm still out in the mud, off to your left.*

Well, that was something. Nomad could summon the weapon at any time, making it vanish, then appear in his hands. The bonds on his wrists were tight, but Auxiliary could become all kinds of odd shapes. One might work for freeing Nomad. But if he wasn't in immediate danger, then there was no reason to reveal what he could do. So for now, Nomad considered other methods. Perhaps if he broke his thumb, he could get his hand out, then let it heal. Unfortunately he healed fractures much more slowly than bruises.

Movement off to his left caught his eye. He turned his head as well as he could and noticed a swiveling black box with a blinking light. A security camera? It lingered on him for a moment, then rotated away toward the podium.

Glowing Eyes's voice rose to a crescendo as he gestured to Nomad. Damnation. Even if he could get free, he still had on the bracers that froze him. And he was still surrounded by enemies that he couldn't fight and cameras that could track him. What good would it do to get a hand free in such a situation?

You might be in real trouble this time, Auxiliary said.

"You think?"

Do I think? I'm not sure. Depends on your definition.

"You know, I liked you much better when you were alive."

And who is to blame for that?

Nomad snarled and raged against the chains. His attention was finally drawn away from his predicament, however, as several officials led a few ragged captives up to the podium ship. Glowing Eyes seized each of them in turn by the throat, and they seemed to wilt, their skin growing ashen. When he tossed them aside, they were corpses, and the ember in his chest grew brighter.

The crowd cheered, and then that cheering built as another captive was dragged to the podium ship. Two guards in white coats accompanied her, one

carrying a long spear, while the other had a rifle. Glowing Eyes didn't grab this captive, but instead raised his hands to let the crowd yell.

Nomad's eyes lingered on that rifle. It was the first modern weapon he'd seen here. Were those rare? He inspected this latest captive and realized it was the woman who had done so well avoiding capture. The one it had taken two ember people to catch.

"That woman…" Nomad said. "She was one of the better fighters—or at least, better dodgers—in the arena earlier. Perhaps because she fought well, they're going to reward her?"

Glowing Eyes gestured to the woman, and the crowd roared. He slapped her on the shoulder in an almost congratulatory way. But then the captive woman started to struggle harder, and Nomad got a sinking feeling.

Not my problem, he thought to himself.

Glowing Eyes waved to the side, and one of the guards handed him the spear. Glowing Eyes removed a sheath, revealing that the spearhead itself had a glowing ember at the tip—so bright that it left a trail in Nomad's vision.

The captive screamed.

Glowing Eyes rammed the spear into the woman's chest.

Nomad had just the right angle to see what happened next. Glowing Eyes yanked out the spear, leaving the ember behind. The officials scattered in a panic, though Glowing Eyes remained, unconcerned. The agonized captive fell to her knees, her screams intensifying as searing heat flared at her core. Sparks and jets of flame sprayed out, like from a stoked campfire, individual motes scoring the skin of her arms and face—leaving streaks that continued to glow even after the central fire in her chest subsided.

The woman finally slumped to the side, although her eyes didn't close. She lay there, staring sightlessly, the quiet flame in her chest illuminating the podium floor.

Well, Auxiliary said, *I guess now we know where those ember people come from.*

"Agreed," Nomad said, feeling sick. "My guess is they choose the most agile captives to be elevated. After all, the ones he fed upon were some of the weaker captives."

A stretch, perhaps, but logical enough.

Nomad took a deep breath. "That might give us an opportunity. You think we could absorb whatever powers those spears? Maybe get enough BEUs to escape this planet?"

No, I'd say it isn't powerful enough for a Skip, Auxiliary said. *Hard to say without more information, but I'd guess a spear like that has a couple thousand BEUs—maybe ten to twenty percent Skip capacity at most. More than enough to give you a Connection to the planet, though. You'd finally be able to understand what people are saying, and have a reserve left for healing or powering me up.*

As the guards returned to drag off the newly made ember woman, Glowing Eyes strode back onto the podium, and someone approached with two more spears. Glowing Eyes took one and whipped its sheath off, revealing a second glowing tip—like metal heated white-hot, yet somehow never cooling. The crowd shouted and cheered even louder.

"I'll bet," Nomad said, "he's going to use one of those on me. He tried to get me killed, but his people failed. So now he's going to try something else."

Ah, the hero says with a sense of understanding. Yes, that's reasonable. Why isn't he worried that you'll turn against him once you're given powers?

"I suspect he counts on the freezing bracers to control the others, and he just proved to himself they work on me."

Seems dangerous.

"Agreed," Nomad said.

In this case, the situation wouldn't play out as Glowing Eyes expected. If he touched the spear tip to Nomad, he'd be able to absorb the power from it. It was one of the few useful aspects of his Torment. Nomad had gained an unusual ability to metabolize nearly any kind of Investiture, although he sometimes required Auxiliary's help.

Right. But why are there two spears?

"They'll want to do me last," Nomad said. "As the big finish. So I assume there is another poor captive to be…"

He trailed off as they pulled a second person up onto the podium: the gap-toothed man who had helped Nomad earlier. As soon as he saw the poor fellow, Nomad realized it made sense. He'd just been theorizing that they turned the best fighters into ember people. This fellow might be a little overweight, but he'd managed to elude capture—and had even gone out of his way to help Nomad, who was aggressively being targeted.

The man's grit had earned him a terrible reward. The crowd cheered as Glowing Eyes raised the second spear. The poor captive screamed a piteous sound, pulling against his captors.

Not my problem, Nomad told himself, closing his eyes.

But he could still hear. And somehow, in shutting out the light—there within the blackness of his own design—he felt something. Something of the person he'd once been.

Words once spoken. In a moment of glorious radiance.

Damnation, he thought as the man's terrified shouts shook him to the core.

Nomad forced his eyes open and *ripped* his right hand out of the manacle, his supernatural strength shattering the thumb and tearing the skin along the sides of his hand. He raised his bleeding hand above his head and to the side, then summoned Auxiliary from the mud.

Holding the hilt with only his fingers against his palm, Nomad whipped his hand forward, throwing Auxiliary to spin—flashing and glorious—through the air. Aux slammed into one of the pillars on the podium right next to Glowing Eyes's head—a six-foot-long glittering sword, Auxiliary's truest form. It sank deeply into the pillar and hung there, quivering.

The crowd hushed.

Huh, Auxiliary said in his head. *I thought you couldn't do that anymore.*

He'd intentionally aimed away from Glowing Eyes. By not threatening anyone, Nomad could avoid triggering the Torment. That said, it had been a while since he had seen the full Blade, been able to access it in all its glory. As he'd hoped, Glowing Eyes was stunned by this spectacular apparition. He gaped at the sword in confusion, forgetting his captive. The gap-toothed man shrank back in the grip of his guards, but hadn't been touched by the spear yet.

Nomad resummoned Auxiliary, trying to form the Blade again. He failed. The Torment had slipped up once, but now it was on guard. No weapons. Nomad raised Auxiliary high in the form of a tall pole. His thumb screamed in pain, but a bracer at the bottom held it in place, letting him grip it with his unbroken fingers. He formed it into a wrench next, then a crowbar.

Glowing Eyes watched the weapon, entranced, a visible hunger in his wide eyes. He stumbled off the platform, carrying the spear. Fixated on Nomad.

"Good," Nomad whispered. He met those glowing eyes, daring them forward. "Good. You want this. Come, try to take *me* as one of your slaves. Then you can command me to give it to you, right?"

The man approached, paused, then held the spear in front of him, threatening.

"I don't fancy being stabbed as I absorb the Investiture," Nomad said to Auxiliary. "You want to handle this one?"

Yes, Auxiliary said. *Just form me as a receptacle—or even a standard shield—on your chest as he stabs, and I'll recycle the energy.*

Glowing Eyes hesitated a few feet from Nomad.

"Come on, you!" Nomad shouted. "Stab me!"

The man put the white-hot spear tip near Nomad's eye and demanded something.

"I don't speak your tongue, idiot," Nomad said. "Just stab me!"

The man waved at Nomad's hands, speaking again, sterner.

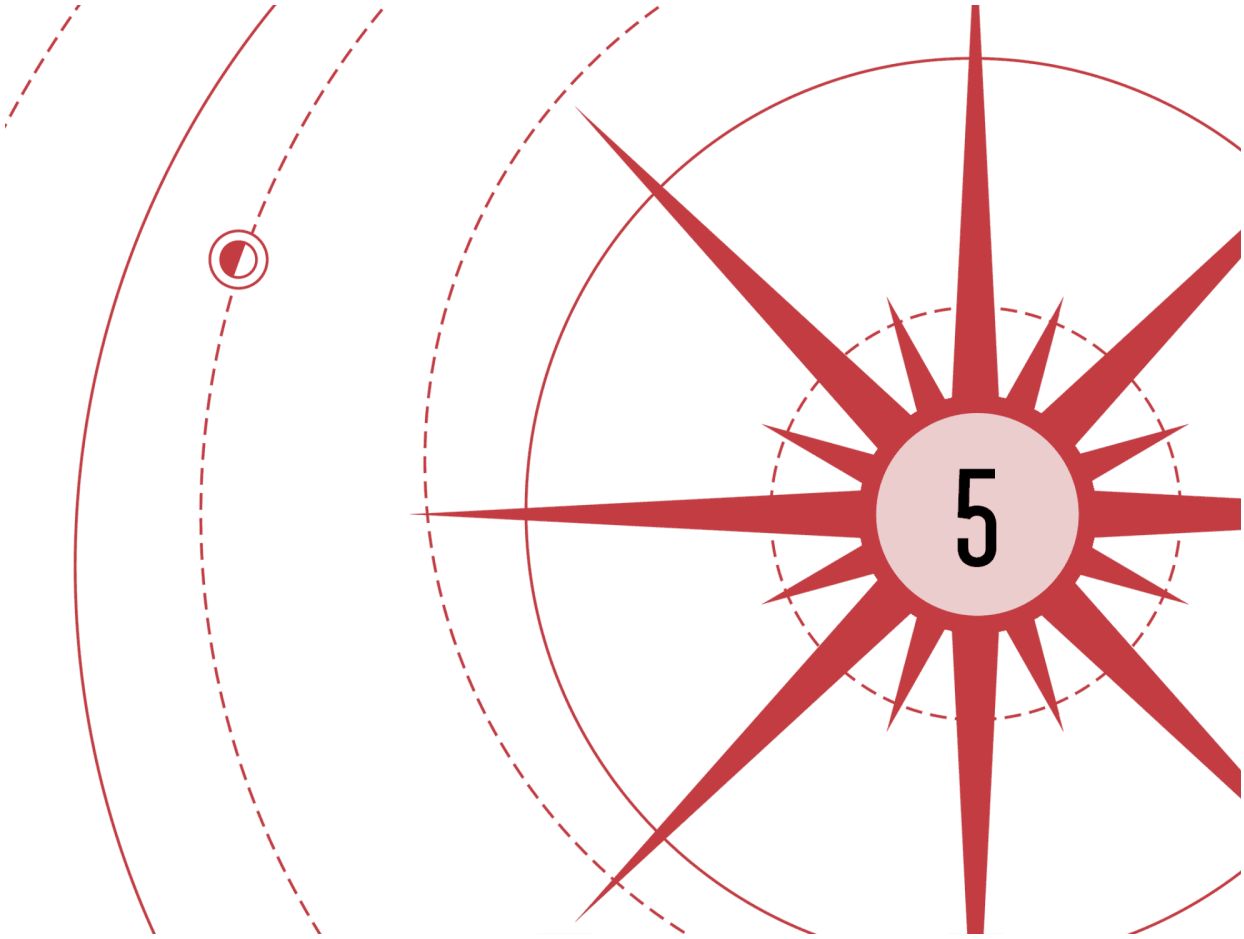
He wants you to show him, the knight explains to his sometimes-dense squire, how you summon the tools.

Instead Nomad summoned a nice dollop of spit—spiced with the mud that still crusted his lips—and delivered it right into the bastard's eye. The spittle *hissed*, as if on a hot plate, and the man jerked back, furious.

He pointed his spear at Nomad's chest, growling, causing the crowd to cheer.

Here we go, Nomad thought.

At that moment, one of the nearby ships exploded.



NOMAD CRIED OUT in frustration as Glowing Eyes turned toward the sound, then began shouting orders as he strode—tall and unflinching—back toward the podium.

Weapon fire—blasts with a distinctly red-white heat—rained from the sky. Glowing Eyes shouted something else, and ember people—a good two hundred of them—came running out onto the rims of ships. Then, as one, their embers dulled.

Their bracers were activating. Nomad's did as well, but in a panic, he summoned Auxiliary in a specific shape—two thin metal bracers *underneath* the ones on his arms, separating them from touching his skin. It was an odd construction, as he generally had to make Auxiliary into pieces that were touching—so these weird bracers-under-his-bracers were connected by a rod.

It worked, though, keeping him from being frozen this time.

Clever, the knight compliments his squire with true appreciation. That's an odd shape, even for you.

He could manage practically anything with Auxiliary, assuming he could make it from the appropriate amount of metal. And assuming he understood the construction on a fundamental level. He'd failed to make a clock, for example, until he'd carefully studied the schematics for one.

The remnants of the scholar inside him whispered that he was too simple with this power—that he could do much greater things if he practiced. There just wasn't a lot of time for anything in his life other than running, and the constant pressure sometimes left it difficult to summon the imagination for any but the most obvious solutions.

Regardless, his bracers buzzed as if annoyed to be rendered nonfunctional by being unable to touch his skin. The ember people had no such protection—and they dropped like toddlers at nap time, collapsing where they were, falling into the mud.

Glowing Eyes spun around, obviously shocked by this turn of events. Whatever was happening to them, it seemed to be the actions of the attacking enemy. In any other circumstance, the look on that man's face would have been comical, but Nomad couldn't pause to appreciate it, as the ship he was chained to slowly rose away from the arena floor. It got about five feet up before a blast hit it from above. A violent explosion ripped it apart, ejecting the part with Nomad from the rest of the disintegrating vessel.

On the plus side, Nomad dropped to the ground.

On the minus side, a smoking, sparking piece of the ship came with him. He hit the ground with it right on top of him. His body protested this rough treatment, and all the air was knocked out of him. Invested or not, if he hadn't fallen into the soft mire, he'd have been crushed.

As it was, he was stuck there in the muddy darkness, the huge weight pressing him down—his thumb still broken and healing slowly—as a firefight broke out above.

Oh, come on. He could hold his breath practically forever—with his highly Invested soul renewing his cells in much the same way the sun here made the plants grow. But his chance to steal a weapon was dwindling by the moment.

Nomad, the hero says to his exceptionally lazy valet, this is no time to take a rest.

Nomad gurgled an annoyed reply through the mud.

Yes, that was *a joke on my part,* Auxiliary said. *Proof that I'm not completely mirthless since my death. But, to be more serious, you should probably try to get out of this. That sunrise is going to arrive eventually. I tasted the strength of it earlier. Let it catch you here and you'll be vaporized. Right now I don't have the strength to shield you from such power, and there's no way we can absorb something so potent.*

An explosion shook the ground, vibrating Nomad where he was stuck. His left hand was still manacled to the large piece of wall on top of him. He could pull it free, maybe, but that would probably break his thumb or wrist at the same time, which seemed like a bad idea. His right hand was healing but mostly useless.

Fortunately he could feel air on his legs and even move them. His ankles were sore. He guessed the bonds there had been ripped free in the blast and that the piece of wreckage holding him down covered only his top half.

Right, then. He tried imagining Auxiliary as a knife first—but that didn't work, even though Nomad insisted he was making a tool, not a weapon. He needed something else. He thought back to his days as an aspiring scholar—that seemed so, so long ago—and imagined a jack for lifting something heavy.

The more complicated an item Nomad needed Auxiliary to be, the longer it took—unless he'd been turned into the same thing many times. The jack took a while and formed wrong the first time, so Nomad had to try again. But eventually he got Auxiliary to appear next to his right hand in the appropriate shape, with the jack's saddle just underneath the metal's edge.

Nomad didn't have much maneuverability, but he was able to move his free hand onto the specifically designed crank and rotate it a few times. It was enough to lift the metal up perceptibly.

Another clever adaptation, Auxiliary said. *Glad to see some of the old you shining through.*

Fresh air flowed in as he slowly turned the fallen piece of wall into a sort of lean-to over him. Eventually that gave him the room to get both knees underneath him.

Then, with a supreme effort almost betrayed by the slipperiness of the mud, he *heaved* with his legs and flipped himself over. This planted the metal wall down into the mud with him lying on top—one manacle still in place—staring upward.

Ships buzzed around. There wasn't as much blaster fire as he'd thought—these ships didn't have onboard guns. The explosions were from dropped

bombs, and the gunfire he'd seen was all from people wielding rifles on the decks. The ships also couldn't get very high; the highest he saw them flying was fifty or sixty feet. These weren't proper warplanes, but more hovercraft with a little extra oomph.

All through the arena, plants had started sprouting. Just weeds, but it was amazing how quickly this barren pit of mud was becoming a field from only the light reflected off those rings.

"There's Investiture in the light coming from the rings," Nomad said. "Can we absorb that?"

Slowly, it seems, Auxiliary replied. *There isn't much. Maybe ten or twenty BEUs an hour?*

Damnation. Well, most of the ships that had formed the arena had launched into the air, and Glowing Eyes was nowhere to be seen—though many of his ember-hearted subordinates lay in the mud where they'd fallen. This was Nomad's best chance to escape, maybe steal a ship.

He tried to form Auxiliary as a pair of bolt cutters, but even *that* was too much of a weapon for the Torment at the moment. Why had it let him form a Blade one time, and now forbade bolt cutters? He tried a crowbar, leaning on it to get it to break him free of the wall, but he couldn't get the leverage right with his broken thumb.

As Nomad slipped in the mud, a smaller, four-person hovercyle came roaring down, frying plants with its jets. Two people jumped free, a man and a woman. The man carried a rifle, but neither had the white uniform coats of the guards he'd encountered before. They were the aggressors, it seemed—the ones who had attacked Glowing Eyes and his group. Enemies of his enemies, dared he hope?

"Hey!" Nomad shouted as they dashed past. "Hey!"

The woman glanced at him, but the man ignored him, searching the ground for something. A ship went roaring past, the narrow deck crowded with people in dirty clothing. It scooted off into the distance.

It's a rescue mission, Nomad realized. *Those were captives from earlier.*

"*Hey!*" he shouted louder. He held up the crowbar, waving for them. "Help me!"

The two people turned away from him, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out what they were looking for in these weeds. Then, not far off, someone sat up—one of the ember men. He looked lethargic, but…

"Whatever you did to them is wearing off!" Nomad yelled.

The rescuers continued their frantic searching through the growing grass until the man called to the woman, who joined him, and together they heaved a muddy figure up from the grass.

It was the ember woman who had hunted Nomad during the arena melee earlier. She was unmistakable with the silver mixed into her hair, the single glowing mark on her cheek. She looked dazed and disoriented as the two hauled her back toward their vehicle. They walked right past Nomad.

"Storm you!" Nomad said, struggling against his bond. "At least *look* at me!"

They didn't, instead loading their captive onto their hovercycle, locking her with manacles to one of the back two seats. They didn't trust this ember woman. Perhaps they were taking a captive for some kind of ransom or prisoner exchange?

All right. Nomad would need to break his other hand to get free. At least the one he'd broken earlier was mostly healed. He tried yanking his captive hand out and heard—through his agony—the bone snap. But the hand didn't pull free. Damnation! This manacle was tighter than the other, and even with a broken thumb, he couldn't get it out.

Nomad, you're dangerously low on Investiture, Auxiliary said. *You're going to start dipping beneath five percent if you need much more healing. It will weaken you, and remove many of your endurance and strength enhancements.*

Damnation. He waved toward the two people again, but the man of the pair suddenly screamed as a blast of energy hit him on the shoulder. He stumbled back, and the next shot vaporized his entire head.

The body dropped to the weeds as the woman cried out in anguish, barely thinking to take cover behind her hovercycle. Overhead, a ship lowered—the one with a large podium on the back and four pillars at the sides.

Glowing Eyes himself—face lit by the fire within him—stood on the edge, a rifle in hand, and sighted. He fired again at the woman, blasting off a small part of her long, four-seater hovercycle.

She huddled in its shadow, facing Nomad. She managed to grab her fallen companion's rifle, but when she popped up to fire, Glowing Eyes almost took her head off with an expert shot. She, in turn, only got a few wild blasts off that came nowhere *near* to hitting. She fired again and was even *farther* off.

"You need my help," Nomad said, gesturing to the crowbar. "Come on."

She glanced back at him.

“Come on,” he said, tears in his eyes at the pain of his wounded hand. “Come on!”

She said something unintelligible. Then, noticing he didn’t understand, she held up the rifle.

“Yeah, I know how to fire one,” he said, nodding. “I’m better at aiming than you seem to be.”

Liar, Auxiliary said.

“It’s not a lie,” he said. “I am a good shot.”

You’ll lock up the moment you touch a gun.

“She doesn’t understand anyway,” he said, nodding eagerly to the woman.

Meanwhile, beyond the uncomprehending woman, Glowing Eyes was forced to turn and deal with other ships threatening him—dropping bombs aimed at his ship. During that distraction, the woman rescuer finally scrambled over to Nomad and took the crowbar. She struggled, throwing her weight onto it, trying to break the chain where the manacle was tied to the wall. The motion jostled his broken thumb, and he cried out.

Unfortunately the manacle was made of strong stuff. Before she could get him free, Glowing Eyes turned his attention back toward them.

“Go!” Nomad said, pointing at the man.

The woman caught on and ran away. Nomad twisted, dismissing Auxiliary, then immediately summoning him again as a shield on his arm. That intercepted the shots Glowing Eyes fired. Nomad crouched on his knees, sheltering behind his shield, one hand still trapped beneath him and attached to the wall.

The woman huddled beside her hovercycle as—atop it—the ember woman groaned. She was waking up.

“The gun,” Nomad said, pointing and waving.

Hesitant, eyes distrustful, the woman tossed it to him as another barrage of fire rained down. He didn’t dare dismiss the shield, but he *could* alter its shape—giving it long spikes at the bottom that he could ram into the earth so he no longer needed to hold it. He huddled there and—with a single hand—awkwardly moved the rifle around toward the lock.

You’re going to blow your hand off, Auxiliary warned.

“Eh,” Nomad said. “I’ve got two.”

He fired. As he’d hoped, it blew the lock and let him pull his wounded hand free. He grabbed the shield and moved up close to the woman’s ship, huddling beside her.

Healing your other broken thumb now. This is about it, unless you want to drop below five percent.

"Fine, great," he said, examining the hovercycle. "How hard would it be for me to steal this thing? Have you seen how they start the engines?"

You're despicable, Aux said. *This woman saved you. You'd steal her ship?*

"She only did it under duress. How do I start the engines?"

I haven't seen.

Blast. Well, he needed to get rid of Glowing Eyes. Nomad set up with the rifle right beside the seat where the ember woman was strapped down. She glared at him and growled as he insistently told himself he was not going to fire at any person in particular, just kind of randomly.

It worked, though only if he aimed very far away. He blasted the air, and it was enough to frighten Glowing Eyes back for a moment. The woman who had saved Nomad glared at him, shouting something and waving her hands.

I believe she's mad about your bad aim.

"Lady," Nomad said, "I'm having a really bad day. If you're going to scream at me, could you at least do it a little softer?"

She grabbed the gun from him, then fired, keeping Glowing Eyes at bay. Then she gestured at the hovercycle and spoke.

I believe she's offering to take you, Auxiliary said, *if you use the shield to protect her from behind as she flies.*

That would do. He shook his wounded hand, eager for the healing to take hold. Then he paused, scanning the field full of quickly growing tall grasses. The podium had been right over there, hadn't it? He thought he saw something in the grass nearby. A body?

Damnation. Cursing himself for a fool, Nomad held up Auxiliary for cover and dashed in that direction—ignoring the woman's cries of surprise. There, in the muddy ground near where the center of the arena had been, he found the gap-toothed man. He was almost buried in the mud, leg twisted in the wrong direction, his face bleeding from what might have been a kick—doubtless one delivered by the soldiers who had thrown him free when the fighting started.

The poor man looked up and saw Nomad. And even as bombs fell and a glowing line of automatic rifle rounds tossed up soil and burned grass nearby, something sparked in the man's eyes. Hope.

Nomad seized the man by the arm and heaved, ripping him out of the muddy soil and throwing him across his shoulders. Unable to keep Auxiliary up with his wounded hand, Nomad dropped the shield and dashed through

the battlefield, the weight of forgotten oaths on his shoulders. He somehow avoided being shot as he reached the hovercycle and threw the man onto one of the seats. The back left one, across from the ember woman. Hopefully her manacles would hold.

The man, tears in his eyes, whispered a few words. Nomad didn't need to know the language to sense the gratitude in them.

That was uncharacteristic of you, Auxiliary said as Nomad summoned him again as a shield.

"He reminds me of an old friend, that's all." Nomad looked to the woman, still taking cover beside the hovercycle, and gestured toward his shield.

She growled something at him, then held up three fingers, counting down. At zero, he leaped onto the top of the hovercycle, kneeling on the middle of the fuselage between the seats. The woman took the operator's seat, front left. Nomad expanded his shield, growing it big enough to cover them both. He couldn't protect the gap-toothed man, but hopefully attention would be on the driver instead.

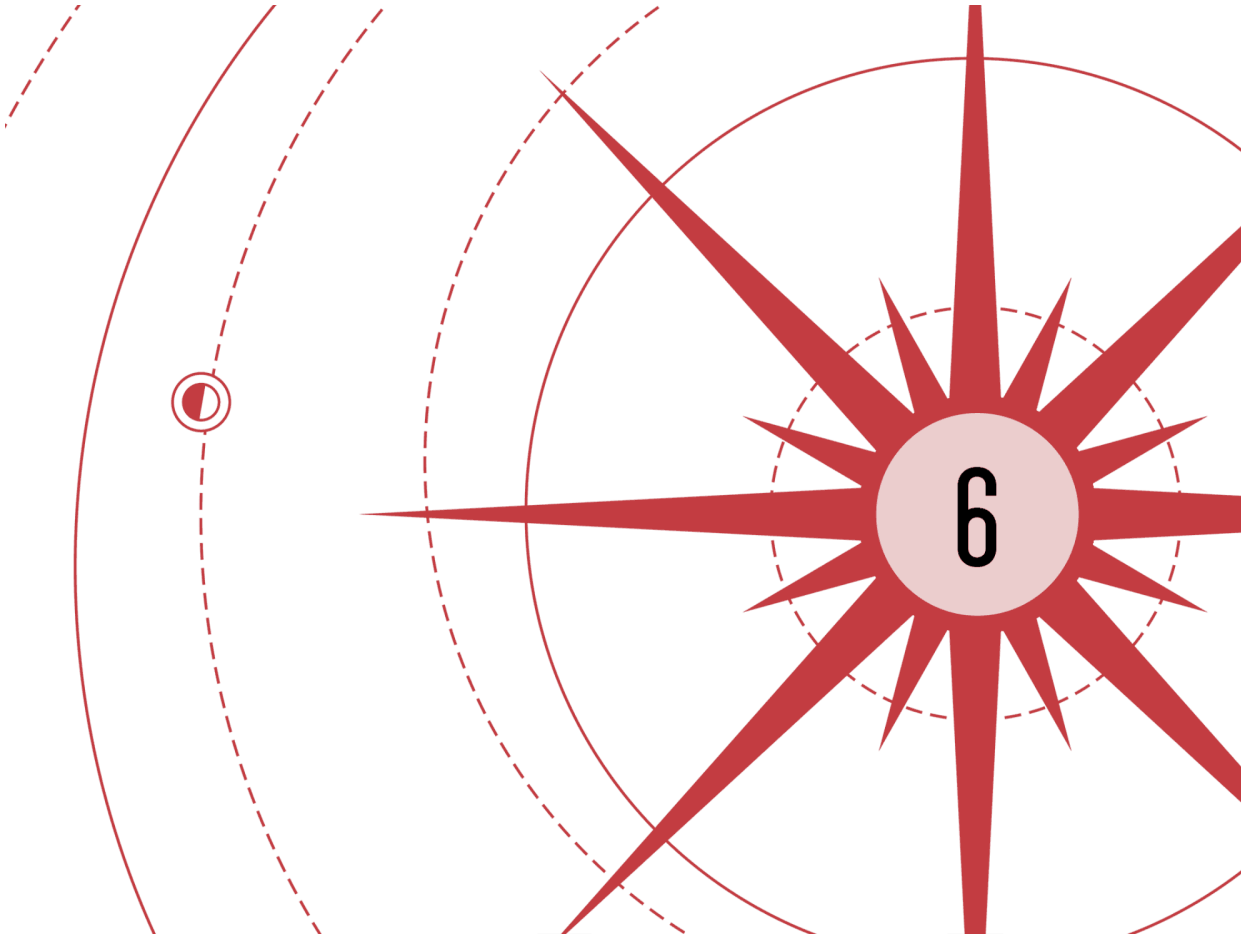
Nomad watched carefully as she fired up the machine. Unlike the big ships, which doubled as buildings, these cycles were intended only as vehicles. She pulled a lever and pushed a button, then paused, gazing toward the headless corpse of her companion.

"Fly!" Nomad said, nudging her as blasts hit his shield. Another enemy ship had noticed them and pivoted to come at them. Worse, the other ember people were all rising from the field of grass like Awakened corpses. Several turned toward them—particularly after the one tied to the back right seat, now fully awake, began shouting and raving.

Finally the woman lifted off and sent them in a low flight just above the grass, following others of her group who—together—fled with the rescued captives. For a moment Nomad thought they'd escaped. He saw Glowing Eyes watching from a distance, standing tall on his podium ship.

But the man didn't need to give chase personally, because in moments, several ships landed to gather the people with embers in their chests. Most of the friendly ships that had executed the hit-and-run attack were far ahead, almost out of sight. Nomad's craft was the lone straggler.

So, naturally, the ships bearing the ember people targeted him.



NOMAD TAPPED ON the driver's shoulder and thumbed backward. She quickly glanced over her shoulder, said something he was quite certain was a curse, then bent lower over the controls. He reached for her rifle, but she put a protective hand on it and glared at him.

Great. He could just kick her free and take the vehicle; he was relatively certain he could fly it. But then she pulled up, gaining elevation.

Something about getting away from the dirty ground, up into the sky toward those rings…it had an effect on him. Wind against his face, the landscape shrinking below. It reminded him of better times. Pure, crisp air acting like a moral decongestant.

He smiled at that thought. It was wordplay his former master would have liked. And maybe there *was* something to be said for the thinner air up here. Maybe he had been, after all, a little bit airsick…

Nah. That was *absolutely* going too far.

Still, he kept his shield in place and didn't try to steal the cycle. Instead he focused on the enemies behind. They crowded onto two sleek war barges. Long and flat, with large decks on the front and cabs at the back. Like flying speedboats, though with the control room farther back and more of a deck on the bow. Ember people stood on those decks, clinging to the railings. Their embers stoked in the wind, growing brighter, like headlights. Their postures determined, eager.

And they were gaining. How had the rescuers expected to pull off their raid when flying inferior ships? A sharpshooter in a white coat stepped out the side door of the cabin onto the deck on one of the warships and took aim. Nomad raised Auxiliary as a shield and noticed that the sharpshooter wasn't one of the ember people. Those appeared to have only melee weapons.

The sharpshooter fired. Not at Nomad or the driver, but at the central fuselage between the seats. As he'd noticed earlier, this cycle he flew on had a strange construction. It featured a long central core with four open seats at the sides—each one designed to be straddled, with handholds on the front and its own windshield.

It was…like four smaller cycles had been attached to a larger core. Three of the spots were taken, and while there was a seat for Nomad at the front right, he was instead clinging to the center of the machine—holding tightly to an improvised handhold with one hand, using his shield with the other to protect his driver's back.

The sharpshooter's blast had hit about three feet away from Nomad, farther along the core fuselage. His driver cursed, looking back past him. He turned his shield transparent to let her see—because the sharpshooter fired again in the same spot, blowing off a piece of the cycle. This exposed some of the underlying mechanism, which glowed brightly.

Nomad, sensing the driver's panic, slid down the fuselage and blocked the next shot—which exploded into sparks against his shield. He'd positioned himself directly behind the place the sharpshooter had targeted, hanging on with one hand to the slick side of the metal housing.

This gave him a good view of what the enemy had targeted: a small hatch on the fuselage. That, blown free, showed a compartment that cradled a brightly glowing chunk of stone…or maybe glass? Roughly the size of a grenade, it had the same red-orange glow as the engines and the blasts the guns were firing.

"Power source?" Nomad guessed, blocking another shot.

Almost assuredly, the knight says almost assuredly.

"Think *that* is powerful enough to get us off of this planet?"

Doubtful.

"It's powerful enough to fly these ships. That's a lot of energy being expended."

Yes, and that is a valid point, but different technologies across different planets are more efficient than others at converting energy to Investiture or vice versa. And your own efficiency at absorption and usage is less than many. My best guess is that you'd need twenty or thirty of those to achieve Skip capacity, but we'll know better once you absorb it. Which I suggest you do only after we land. Unless you'd rather said landing be a little more abrupt than is normally desirable.

"Noted."

Ahead of him, the driver somehow leaned even lower behind the short windshield, the throttle shoved forward as far as it would go. The gap-toothed man Nomad had rescued clung to his seat, eyes wide, hair fluttering in the wind.

Nomad glanced ahead of them, hoping to see a fortress refuge, or a line of reinforcements speeding to their rescue. Instead there was only deep blackness. Above, the rings of the planet appeared to have moved in the sky. But they hadn't actually moved; Nomad's ship was flying forward so fast that it dramatically shifted the angle of the rings from his perspective. They were not only outpacing the rotation of the planet, but changing their orientation compared to stellar bodies.

Storms. They weren't flying *that* fast. How small must this planet be, if flying a short time could round it so quickly? He should have seen from the horizon line, would have seen if he'd been less distracted. But the gravitation was relatively normal, which must mean a dense core, perhaps beyond natural levels for—

Stop, he thought at himself. The man who made calculations like that… you're not that man any longer.

Either way, they were quickly approaching shadows ahead. A place under oppressive cloud cover, where even the reflected sunlight off the rings didn't shine.

The sharpshooter had pulled back inside the cabin, but the enemy ships were gaining on them; Nomad could hear the ember people hooting and shouting. They crowded the front of their platforms, preparing to jump as soon as their ships got close enough to Nomad's cycle.

So, the knight asks, how are you going to survive this *without fighting?*

"I'm hoping the Torment will relax a little," he said. "Maybe take pity on me?"

Good luck with that, the knight replies with an exhaustive amount of rueful skepticism. Nomad missed the days of inflection in that voice. Aux might have started their relationship hesitant to show his true self, but after decades together, his expressiveness had grown and grown. Until…that day.

Nomad refocused on the task at hand, keeping his shield in place. The transparent metal let him watch the approaching ember people as four prepared to leap. Even if he could fight, he'd have trouble handling four at once—particularly with four more coming up on the second ship behind.

Fortunately he had one advantage. Everything he'd seen so far indicated that these beings didn't expect anyone to be as strong as they were. So Nomad took a deep breath, stood up, dashed along the length of the hovercycle, and *jumped*.

It felt familiar.

Wind against his tattered clothing.

An infinite expanse above.

Land below, looking up, aspirational.

Nomad and the sky weren't currently on speaking terms. But they'd been intimate for some time in the past, and he still knew his way around her place.

He felt…stronger now. Where he'd struggled to make the leap onto that box earlier in the day, this time he *soared*.

The ember people watched with shock at the distance he covered. He soared over their heads, hitting the wall of the cabin behind them with enough force to shake the vessel. He slid down it to the front deck of the ship, grinning, summoning Auxiliary as a sword…

Oh right. No swords.

…summoning Auxiliary as an extra-large wrench. He pointed it at the four ember people, then charged them. They made way for him, sidestepping and surrounding him. He didn't swing, though. He spun toward one of them and formed Auxiliary as a shield right as they attacked. He blocked the blow, then threw the ember person back before spinning to block the next attack.

He met each attack with alacrity—though having a huge, transparent, moldable shield *was* an undeniable advantage. He had to be careful not to push them too aggressively, lest his Torment activate.

Nomad, the knight warns, check the other ship.

He glanced to the side, seeing that the second vessel had almost caught up to the hovercycle. His gap-toothed friend was listing, strapped in place but losing consciousness from his pain. The captive ember woman fought against her restraints and howled toward her allies, but the driver—leaning low—was concentrating on trying to fly. She couldn't use her gun, as she had to keep weaving and darting to stay away from the enemy ship.

To no avail. It was faster and more maneuverable. She'd soon have four enemy soldiers crawling along the fuselage toward her. Nomad blocked one more blow, then turned and shoved between two ember people, leaping the distance to the second enemy vessel.

Again, a moment in the air. Glorious.

Then he arrived, just barely grabbing the ship's deck and slamming down beside the vessel, hanging off it. He formed Auxiliary as a ladder, hooked it to a railing above, then scrambled up to face a new group of surprised ember people. Shocked by his sudden appearance, the pilot lost control for a moment, causing the platform to veer toward its companion ship. That let the four ember people there—now wholly focused on Nomad—jump across the narrowed distance. That put all eight in position to fight him on one crowded deck.

Perfect.

In a fight of one against many, chaos favored him. A trained military squad would have easily surrounded and pinned him, but these people didn't fight with coordination. They came at him individually, shouting angrily. They were quick and strong, but their usual advantage over others had taught them the wrong lessons. They thought they didn't need to fight as a team. He'd seen it many times.

He rolled to the deck, skidding and coming up with his shield, blocking the machetes and maces that managed to track him. Other ember people stumbled or tripped one another in their eagerness to get to him. He jumped to his feet, throwing one man back into several others, then leaped closer to the cockpit at the back of the long deck.

Through the window, he saw the pilot in her white coat, watching him with a panicked expression. She hit a button, and a blast shield slid up over her window, sealing her off. Fortunately he wasn't after the pilot. Because Nomad spotted a hatch set into the floor of the deck, similar to the one that had been blown off the hovercycle.

He formed Auxiliary as a crowbar and rammed it into the hatch's lock. The hatch popped open, revealing the power supply.

Ah… the knight says with begrudging admiration.

The power cell inside glowed with a similar light to the spear tip that made the ember people, but the sheen wasn't quite so…violent. To be careful, Nomad formed Auxiliary into a gauntlet on his hand and reached in, then ripped the power cell out. The ember people tried to rush him from behind, but the ship—now without power—dropped beneath them. Nomad got off one last good jump, hurling himself back toward the first warship.

Behind him, the ember people howled as they fell. The unfortunate ship plowed into the ground below just as Nomad landed on its companion.

You should be able to carry that power source without it hurting you, Aux said. *It's different from those spear tips somehow. It is more stable.*

He nodded, taking the glowing power source in one hand while dismissing the gauntlet. As he did, he leaned out over the side, looking down, and noticed that the ember people were pulling themselves from the mud. Here, the ground seemed as wet as it had been at the arena. Maybe rain fell in the darkness. Then, as the planet rotated that landscape toward the sun, the reflected light—and Investiture—of the rings made things grow. Finally the sunrise approached, burning it all away.

What a strange life these people had, always a few hours from total annihilation. No wonder they didn't trust one big, indivisible ship to carry them. Bunches of little engines gave much more redundancy. Not to mention the chance to detach your home from the others and move on ahead if something went wrong with the community.

Remarkably he thought he counted all eight ember people climbing from the wreckage below. Damnation. These things were hard to kill.

He raised his shield and turned toward the cockpit of this ship, where the pilot was accompanied by that sharpshooter. Both stared at him, wide-eyed, through the glass. The sharpshooter raised her rifle at him. And in a panic, she fired—melting holes through the windshield, unloading at him.

Each shot bounced off his shield. Then predictably they tried to raise their own blast shield. So he tossed Auxiliary at the window—jamming him into the mechanism so it failed to cover the half-melted window.

Nomad advanced. Completely unarmed, of course—and worse, completely unable to harm these two. But they didn't know that. He pointed at their gun, then glared down at them. He'd noticed that people here were, on average, shorter than those of his homeworld. He'd often felt short compared to the towering Alethi, but here *he* was the tall one.

Intimidated by the strange man holding an energy core in his bare hand, the sharpshooter obeyed Nomad's demand. She lowered the gun, then—in response to his miming—tossed it out through the ruined windshield. She stepped back, raising her hands. The pilot kept at his controls, and as Nomad seized the gun, the man rolled the ship.

When they returned to verticality, the sharpshooter was collapsed on the cabin's floor. The strapped-in pilot had kept his place. Nomad stood where he had before, Auxiliary having formed a magnetic boot around one of his feet. His heart pounded; he hadn't been sure that would work. He smiled with relief, raised the energy core to his face, and breathed in.

It had taken him months to get the trick of that. He was certain that the "breathing in" part was purely psychological, but it somehow facilitated the action. Being able to feed on Investiture was an aftereffect of the burden he'd once carried, the thing that had given him his Torment.

He needed a power source that was potential, not kinetic. Scientific terms that, in this case, meant he was extremely good at leeching batteries or other stable sources of Investiture. However, something like an energy blast being shot at him or—unfortunately—the power of that sun wouldn't work. Too intense, too kinetic. It was also storming difficult for him to get Investiture out of a person or another living being, requiring very unique circumstances.

In this case, though, he had what he needed: a battery of some sort. He easily absorbed the Investiture of that fragment of the sun—a ball of molten light that somehow wasn't the least bit hot in his fingers. As he took the Investiture in, the entire core dimmed, its energy drained. Depleted, it looked like dark glass or one of the gemstones from his homeworld, except there were more smooth ripples and bumps on its surface, like melted glass or slag.

Inside his head, Auxiliary sighed in satisfaction. *That'll do, the knight tells his unwashed companion.*

"How much did we get?" Nomad asked.

That jumped us up to over ten percent. Still want me to Connect you to this land so you can speak the language?

"Absolutely," Nomad said. "I'm tired of hearing only gibberish."

Right, Aux said. *Give me a few minutes, and I'll have it done.*

Nomad nodded. He pointed the rifle at the pilot, disguising the way his arms locked up by making it seem like he was standing there, stoic, ready to fire. The pilot grew even paler at the sight. Nomad lowered the gun as soon as his muscles relaxed, then gestured to the side.

The pilot obediently took him in close to the fleeing hovercycle. Nomad nodded, then pointed at the pilot and gestured dramatically backward with as much of an ominous expression as he could form. He tried to make the implication as clear as possible: *I'd better not see you following.*

Nomad jumped onto the hovercycle. It seemed the enemy pilot had understood Nomad's command, because he immediately turned his craft and fled toward the other ships that were giving chase in the distance. The landscape was growing darker, and ahead, rainfall masked the air further. As they sped toward it, that sheet of rainfall reminded Nomad of another storm back home. A place he missed terribly but could never visit again, lest he lead the Night Brigade to people who loved him.

The gap-toothed man was staring at him in awe. When had he regained consciousness? The woman flying the hovercycle glanced back. Then paused. Her eyes went wide as she saw the one ship fleeing, the other one nowhere in sight. Storms. Hadn't she been watching? Had she only now noticed what he'd done? Judging by her expression, that was indeed the case.

He sighed. By this point, he had gotten accustomed to the way many outsiders looked. He didn't think they were "childlike" because of their odd eyes; in fact, he had come to recognize the many nuances of countless ethnicities. He knew Alethi with eyes as open and wide as a Shin, while he'd met offworlders who could have passed for Veden—even within a population of people who generally wouldn't have.

Still, he couldn't help thinking they looked a little bug-eyed when expressing surprise. Well, to each their own. He clambered forward to the seat to her right. In the process, though, he caught his foot and dropped his rifle over the side.

He leaned out and reached for it, then came up empty-handed and shrugged.

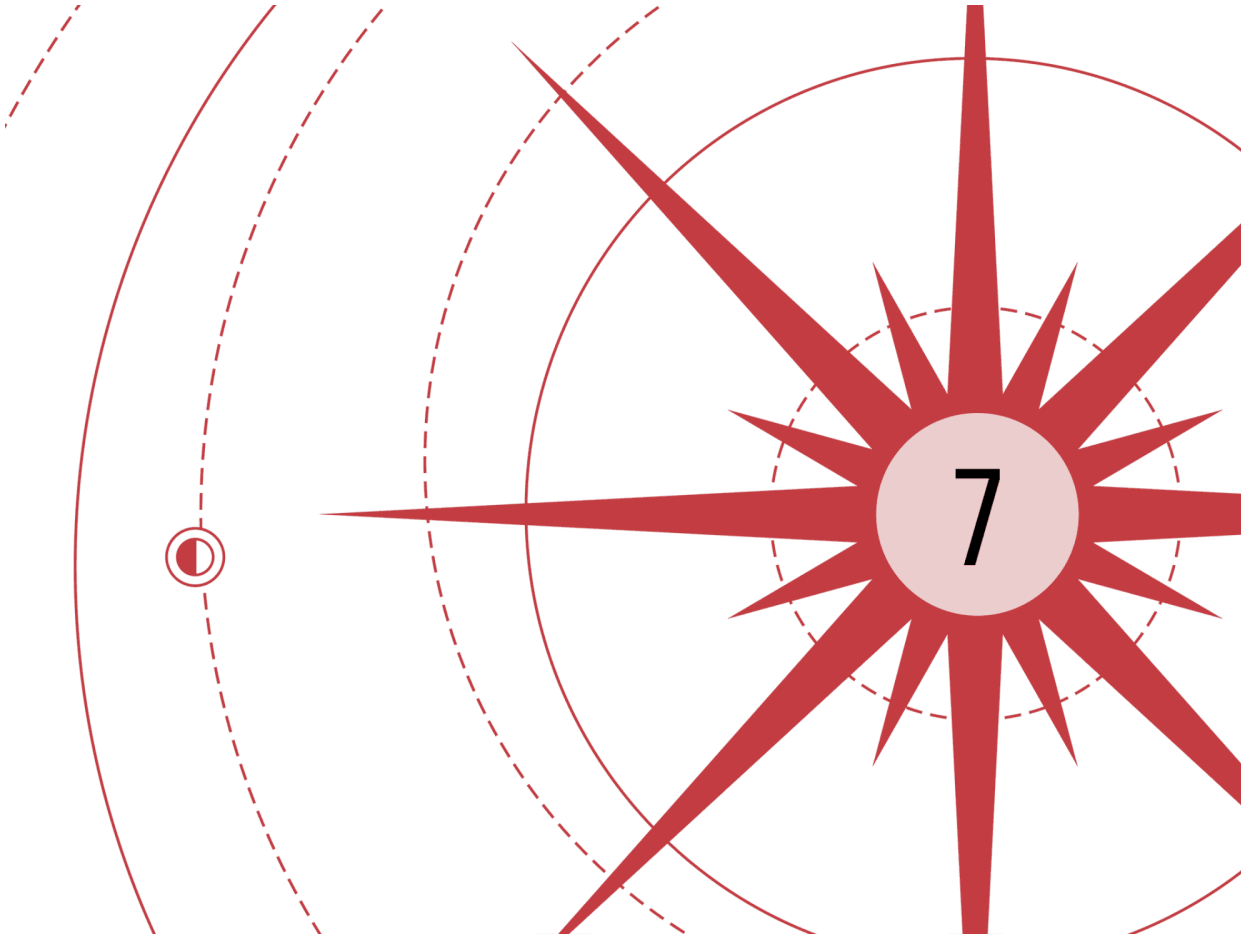
The driver said something to him, sounding frustrated.

"Yeah," he said, settling down in the seat across from hers, "I bet you're annoyed I lost a gun. Those don't seem plentiful around here. Ah, well." He sighed and shook his hand. His thumb was working fine, and the pain had faded, the scrapes on the sides of his hand healed. "Don't suppose you've got anything good to drink?"

He said this in Alethi on purpose, which wasn't his native tongue. Previous experiences had taught him not to speak in his own language, lest it slip out in the local dialect. That was how Connection worked; what

Auxiliary was doing would make his soul *think* he'd been raised on this planet, so its language came as naturally to him as his own once had. Since he generally didn't want people listening in on what he said to Auxiliary, it was better to get into the rhythm of speaking Alethi when he didn't wish to be understood.

Regardless, the driver of the hovercycle could only stare at Nomad as they passed into the darkness of this strange, oppressive cloud cover.



THE RAIN HERE wasn't nearly as bad as a storm back home. Just a quick wash of cold water. The sprinkle lasted less than a minute, though they soon passed through another one. He guessed that those omnipresent clouds made for near-constant scattered showers in this dark zone.

"This place is quite spectacular," he said to Auxiliary. "Sun constantly driving forward, vaporizing all of this." He glanced at the dash in front of him, which had a compass as one of the readings. That required him to reorient how he'd been viewing this all. "Sun rises in the west here, behind us. Chasing us, vaporizing everything in its path, superheating water in a flash. We don't dare get too far ahead, lest we reach the sunlight again. So ahead of us, in the east, the planet rotates and plunges everything into sudden darkness. I'll bet this storm here is the aftermath of that, created at sunset by sudden cooling of all that superheated water."

Indeed, the knight replies to his squire's strange rambling. It's been a long while since we've been on a planet with a persistent storm. Remind you of

home?

"In all the wrong ways," Nomad said. "The weather pattern doesn't make sense, considering the heat on the other side. I'm no meteorologist, but my gut tells me this entire planet *should* be a vortex of unlivable misery."

The hovercycle had consoles with lights to let the driver know what she was doing, so they weren't *completely* blind. But there weren't headlights on the thing, and the lack of even a token canopy or roof made him think that people didn't fly these things into the darkness often.

That made sense. This woman's force attacked a clearly more dangerous power on a rescue mission. He seemed to have joined some sort of guerrilla force—one that hid in the darkness others feared to enter. A small nation of raiders, perhaps?

But how had their people been taken in the first place? And if they were consistently doing this kind of work, why hadn't they altered their ships to fly in the rain without soaking themselves?

So he walked back his assumptions, returning to what he knew for certain, then worked forward again. Thinking methodically, logically. That part of him remained, the part that had pushed for evidence and statistics even when his friends had laughed. He was still the same person all these years later. Just as a hunk of metal was technically the same substance after being forged into an axe.

They're not raiders, he decided. *They're refugees. They were attacked by that larger group, then they went into hiding. Now they've dared strike back to rescue their friends.*

A working theory only, but it felt right. What he couldn't figure out was why they'd kidnapped an ember person. To experiment on, or perhaps…

I'm an idiot, he thought, looking at the driver and noting her dark black braid, woven with silver, resting over her shoulder. The shape of her youthful features mirrored those of the woman tied up behind them, both bearing light green eyes, of a shade that might have marked them as nobility back on his homeworld.

The ember woman was a family member. Probably an older sister, based on their relative ages. He should have seen it earlier. These people had been attacked, captives taken, and some of them had been subjected to terrible torment. The driver next to him had rescued one. Dangerous business, judging by how the ember woman continued to struggle and growl, the light from her chest glowing bloodred in the darkness.

But who was he to judge? He was just here to steal a ship, then find a power source strong enough to get him off this planet. Though first, he figured he'd let the driver feed him and give him something to drink for saving her hide.

He felt the Connection happening as they soared farther into the darkness. But the confirmation came as the woman spoke on her radio. "Beacon?" she said. "This is an outrider, requesting signal alignment."

"Rebeke?" a man's voice asked. "Rebeke Salvage, that you?"

"If it is agreeable," she said, "it is me. Code for admittance is thankfulness thirteen."

"Good to hear your voice, girl," the man replied, the words nearly lost to Nomad in the howl of the wind. "Is Divinity with you?"

Rebeke's voice caught as she replied. "No. He fell."

Silence through the line. Finally the man continued, "May his soul find its way home, Rebeke. I'm sorry."

"My brother chose this risk," she said, tears mixing with the rain on her cheeks. "As did I."

Nomad glanced toward her across the fuselage. This Rebeke looked young to him suddenly. Barely into her twenties, perhaps. Maybe it was the tears.

"Zeal," Rebeke said. "I'm…bringing someone. If it pleases you to respond with temperance, I would appreciate it."

"Someone?" the man, Zeal, said. "Rebeke…is that why you fell behind? Did you go for your sister, *explicitly* against the will and guidance of the Greater Good?"

"Yes," Rebeke whispered.

"She's dangerous! She's one of them."

"We exist because of Elegy," Rebeke snapped, voice growing stronger. "She led us. She inspired us. I couldn't leave her, Zeal. She's no danger to us as long as she remains bound. And maybe…maybe we can help her…"

"We'll talk about this when you return," Zeal replied. "Signal to Beacon has been granted. But Rebeke…this was reckless of you."

"I know." She glanced at Nomad, who was making a great show of leaning back, eyes closed, pretending he didn't understand. "I've got someone else too. A…captive?"

"You sound uncertain."

"I rescued him from the Cinder King," she said. "But something's wrong with him. He can't speak right. I think he might be slow in the head."

"Is he dangerous?"

"Maybe?" she said. "He helped Thomos, who I missed spotting in the grass. Tell his family I have him. But before that, this stranger pretended to be a killer to get me to free him, then wasn't much use in the fighting."

Not much use?

Not much *use*?

He'd brought down two enemy ships without even being able to *fight back*. He forced himself not to respond, but Damnation. Was she lying or… Well, she hadn't *seen* him back there. But she'd noticed him carrying a rifle after the other ships vanished. Where did she think he'd gotten that?

Have you noticed the names? the knight asks curiously.

"Elegy," Nomad said in Alethi. "Divinity. Zeal. Yeah, I did notice. Do you think…"

Threnodites, the knight replies, modestly confident in his wise assessment. An entire offshoot culture. Didn't expect that. Did you?

"No, but I should have," he said. "The clothing is similar. Wonder how long ago they diverged?"

Did you guess that the captive was this woman's sister?

"That I did pick out," he said, thoughtful. "Threnodites. Don't they… persist when they're killed?"

They turn into shades under the right circumstances, the hero explains to his dull-minded valet, who really should remember almost being eaten by one.

"Right," he said. "Green eyes, then red when they want to feed. Complete lack of memories. I feel like we would have seen those already. Shades come out in the darkness, and we've been in nothing *but* darkness since getting here."

Perhaps this group split off before the Shard's death—and the event's aftereffects—took them.

Nomad nodded thoughtfully. The persistent clouds of this region—without even the rings glowing in the sky to orient him—felt more pernicious now. As if he were soaring through space itself, with nothing below or above. Eternal darkness. Perhaps populated only by the spirits of the dead.

He was pleased, then, when some fires appeared up ahead—the light of blazing engines underneath a city. In this dark, rain-filled landscape with misty showers and tall black hillsides, they had to be practically upon the place before it became visible. It seemed smaller than the large city he'd left

behind, and didn't leave as much of a trail on the ground from its engines—and what it did leave probably washed away in this rain. All things considered, it was well hidden in here, even with those blazing engines.

Rebeke flew the hovercycle up to the agglomeration and locked it into place at the side of the city—the place known as Beacon, he assumed. Despite its name, it was running impressively dark. He spotted a few lights here and there, but only small ones, always soft red. The engines underneath would be masked so long as they stayed low and let the hills and rain shield them.

He didn't get a good sense of Beacon's size, though the easy way their hovercycle settled in and became just another part of its structure made him think it probably had the same architecture as the platform he'd been on before. A few people waited for them in the blowing drizzle, lit by the deep red hand-lantern carried by the lead man, who was tall, stern, and dour. Nomad pegged him immediately as the man named Zeal, the one Rebeke had spoken to on the radio.

He was surprised, then, when Zeal's voice instead came from the mouth of the very short man standing to the side. Not even four feet tall, the small man had a normal-sized head, but shorter arms and legs than your average person. His eyes were a dark brown, like Nomad's own.

"Rebeke," Zeal said. "What you've done is dangerous."

"More dangerous than Elegy's plan?" she said. "Did you recover it, Zeal?"

Instead of responding, he thoughtfully studied Nomad. "Is this the stranger? What is his name?"

"I was not graced with such information," Rebeke said. "He doesn't seem able to understand the words I speak. As if…he doesn't know *language*."

Zeal made a few motions with his hands, gesturing at his ears, then tapping his palms together. He thought maybe Nomad was deaf? A reasonable guess, Nomad supposed. No one else on this planet had tried that approach.

Nomad spoke to him in Alethi, acting confused and gesturing while he talked.

Zeal and the tall man moved to help Thomos, the gap-toothed man. The poor fellow was listing again, semiconscious and mumbling, held in his seat by only his belt. At Zeal's orders, several others rushed him off, presumably for medical attention.

"Take good care of him," Nomad said in Alethi.

“What *is* that gibberish?” the taller man said, raising his lantern. The fellow was so thin and so tall that with the lantern raised, he kind of resembled a lamppost. Especially in that long black raincoat.

“He frequently makes such noises,” Rebeke said.

“Curious,” the tall man replied.

Zeal looked toward the locked-in hovercycle, then approached slowly. The tall man joined him, as did Rebeke, all three standing and staring at the ember woman tied in the back, growling.

“Elegy,” Zeal said. “Elegy, it’s *us*.”

This provoked only more growling. Zeal sighed. “Come. We must petition to the Greater Good and supplicate them for your sake. Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually, please see to her the best you can.”

The tall man nodded.

Wait. His name was Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually? That was the best one Nomad had heard yet. He really needed to keep a list of these Threnodite names.

“Oh,” Zeal added, “and find quarters for Rebeke’s guest, if you would, Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually. Grant unto him one of the ships without local access controls, if it pleases you to do this task. He looks as if he would savor a bath and a bed.”

Zeal and Rebeke started off together down the street, and Zeal turned on a red flashlight to lead the way. A bed and a bath *did* sound good, but knowing what was going on here sounded better. So Nomad started off after them.

Naturally Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually hastened over to take his arm and gently tried to lead him away. Nomad smiled calmly, then pried his hand off and continued. When the man tried harder, Nomad yanked free more forcefully.

It was belligerent, yes. Maybe a great way to get into trouble. Perhaps they’d attack him, and he’d have an excuse to steal that hovercycle. He probably should have just done that, but…well, he was feeling charitable. So he simply marched after the other two, tailed by a nervous Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually.

Rebeke and Zeal entered a building—well, a ship with a larger structure on the deck. Nomad stepped in after them, not letting the door close. He saw it was a dimly lit small antechamber with plain flat-black walls. Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually crowded in after him.

“My greatest repentance, Zeal,” the tall man said, chagrined. “He just… won’t go with me.”

“Maybe we should present him to the Greater Good,” Rebeke said. “It could be agreeable to them to see him, and perchance they might know what manner of person he is.”

“It is agreeable to me,” Zeal replied after brief consideration. “You can trust him to us, Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually.”

“What if he’s dangerous?” the tall man whispered. “Rebeke said…he might be a killer.”

“Those bracers on his wrists,” Zeal said. “Presumably the Cinder King hasn’t yet had a chance to reset them. I think we shall be well.”

Nomad had almost forgotten the bracers he was still wearing. He managed to keep from looking down at them as they were mentioned. This all but confirmed his earlier assumption that these people had been able to disable the ember people with some kind of hack or system exploit in the bracers.

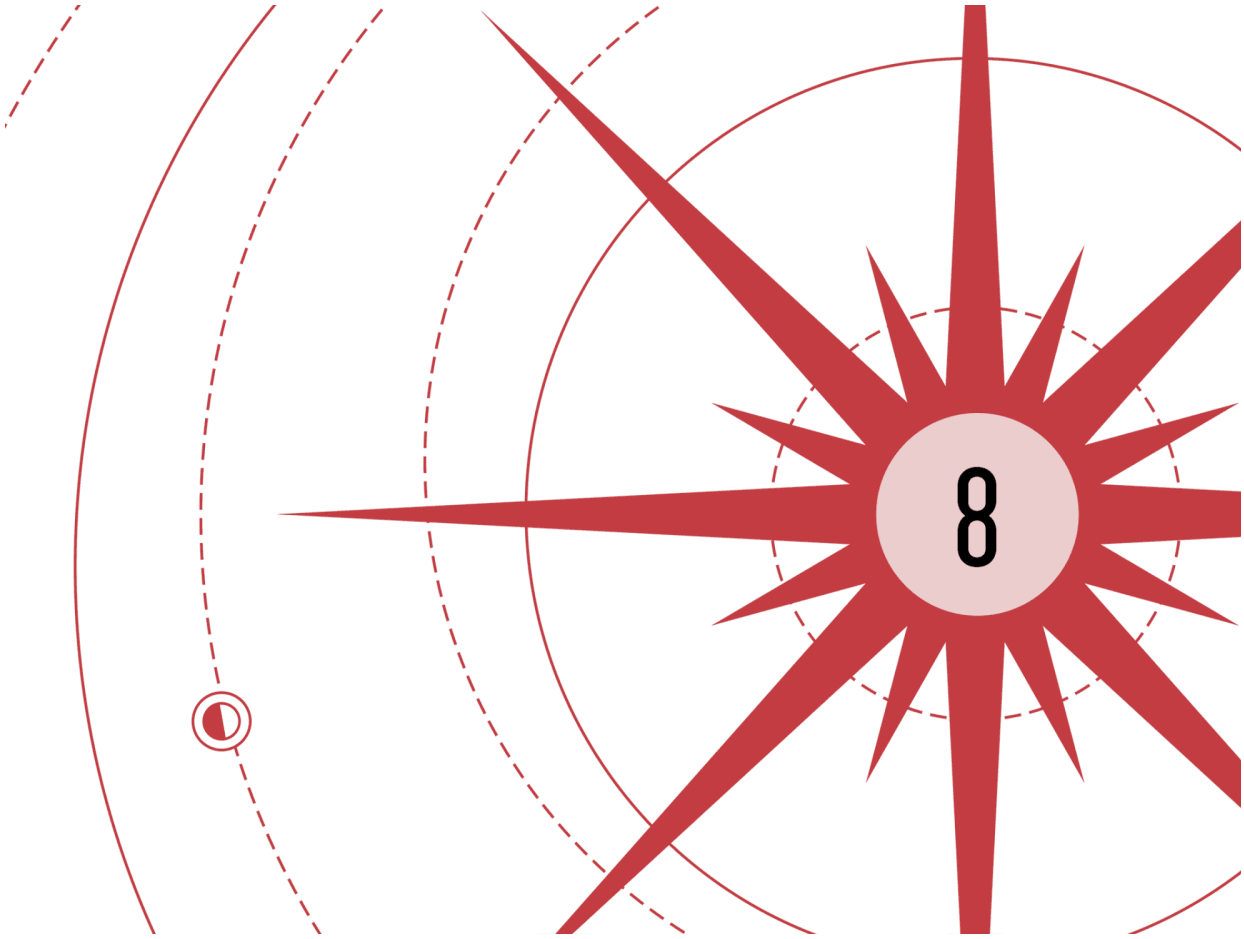
Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually left to deal with the chained-up woman, Elegy, and Rebeke pushed open a door at the far end of the antechamber and led them into a properly lit hallway. The contrast was briefly blinding, though the electric lights in the ceiling were set relatively low.

There were no windows, of course. That small antechamber had been a lightlock. Meant to keep people from spilling the building’s light out onto the street, allowing them to keep moving invisibly in this darkness. A quick glance showed him that the wall and door separating them from the lightlock was made of a less sturdy wooden material, while the floor and ceiling were metal. That antechamber had been added recently.

Yes, they were almost certainly a people who’d only recently gone on the run, hiding in this deeper darkness beneath the clouds.

He joined the other two in crossing the hallway, and didn’t miss that Zeal kept a close eye on him—hand in his pocket, perhaps ready to control the bracers and freeze Nomad again. They led him into a room at the end of the hallway, and he entered, eager to meet the ones they called the Greater Good.

They turned out to be three elderly women.



OLD WOMEN? THAT wasn't as exciting as he'd hoped. But, hey, maybe one was secretly a dragon.

Nomad could tell from the behavior of the others that these women were in charge, though they weren't wearing anything regal—just common black dresses, gloves like everyone else, and hats, even here indoors. The heavyset one was pale skinned, while the other two were of a more familiar, darker skin tone.

The three ladies sat at a table, taking a report from a burly man with dark brown eyes and a black beard that could have hosted a fine topiary, if it had been trimmed. Nomad had a cousin back home that looked a lot like the fellow. He had a blast mark on one arm, the jacket there burnt, exposing the glancing wound. Another member of the raiding party.

"Confidence," Rebeke said to the first and tallest of the women. She had blue eyes. "Compassion." This was the shortest of them, and the frailest in appearance, with light brown eyes. "Contemplation." This was the woman of

wider girth, the one with pale skin but black hair—obviously dyed—curled up on top of her head. Her grey-green eyes matched the shawl she wore. “I have recovered my sister,” Rebeke continued after a nod of respect to each of the three.

“So we’ve been informed,” Contemplation said, rubbing her chin. “I believe you were told not to be so brash.”

“I was.”

“And you lost your brother,” Confidence said. “One sibling sacrificed for the rescue of another?”

“We couldn’t—” Rebeke started, but the short woman they called Compassion had risen. Walking unsteadily, she stumbled over and grabbed Rebeke in a hug.

Rebeke lowered her head, stray locks of hair falling around her face, and held on.

The room fell silent. It was probably heartwarming or something. Nomad was more interested in the kettle of tea on the table. He grabbed a chair and pulled it over, then got himself a drink. He dripped water on the floor from his sodden clothing as he did so.

The tea was cold. But otherwise not bad. A little too sweet, maybe.

Everyone in the room stared at him. So he leaned back and put his boots up on the table.

The fellow with the beard pushed them off. “What type of person is this, with such terrible manners?” he demanded.

The man trailed off as Nomad stood. Again, though considered a short man in his homeland, here he had a good half a foot on anyone in the room. With his clothing ripped, they undoubtedly could see his muscles—earned, not simply a result of his Invested status.

The bearded man looked him over, then backed off, letting Nomad settle down again. He pointedly put his feet back up on the table, rattling the teacups of the three older women.

“Before we sent Thomos to the healers,” Zeal said, pulling over his own chair, “he muttered something deliriously. That he’d seen this man touch the sunlight and live.”

Thomos had seen that, had he? Nomad had almost forgotten his moment of feeling the sunlight before being yanked out of it. Perhaps the prisoners had been forced to watch the executions. Nomad’s opinion of Glowing Eyes went down even further. That was an act of distinct cruelty.

“Sunlit,” Contemplation said. “A Sunlit Man.”

“If it pleases the Greater Good, I disagree,” Rebeke said, taking her own seat at the increasingly crowded table. “Accept this observation: if he were a Sunlit One, he’d be helping us, not acting like…*this*.”

“He speaks gibberish,” Zeal said. “Like a baby not yet weaned.”

“Does he now?” Contemplation said. “Curious, curious…”

“If it pleases you, I thought perchance you’d be able to say what manner of man he was,” Rebeke said. “And honestly…he *insistently* followed us in here. We’d probably have to freeze him to get him to leave.”

“Maybe he’s a killer!” the bearded man said, leaning forward. “Our own killer! Did you see how he glared at me?”

That…was not how Nomad had expected this man to respond. The fellow was smiling, eager.

Rebeke shook her head at the bearded man. “If he were a killer, I think I’d know it, Jeffrey Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey Jeffrey? Nomad liked that one too. “Hey, Aux,” he said in Alethi. “What do you…”

Oh wait. Right. Auxiliary wasn’t around.

Everyone stared at him.

“Such odd words,” Compassion said. “I offer this thought: do you suppose he’s from a far northern corridor? They speak in ways that, on occasion, make a woman need to concentrate to understand.”

“If it pleases you to be disagreed with, Compassion,” Contemplation said, “I don’t think this is a mere accent. No, not at all. Regardless, there are more pressing matters. Zeal, may I be granted the blessing of seeing the object your team recovered?”

The short man reached into his pocket and withdrew something wrapped in a handkerchief. Outside, the wind was rising, the rain drumming more furiously on the metal ceiling and walls. The tapping on the ceiling was like nervous fingers on a bell, demanding service. All of them ignored that, however, as Zeal unwrapped a metal disc almost as wide as a man’s palm, with an odd symbol on the front. One that Nomad could read, but which he *absolutely* hadn’t expected to find on this planet. Storms.

What were Scadrians doing here?

“It’s real…” Contemplation said, resting her fingers on it, feeling the grooves in the metal.

“If it is not offensive,” Confidence said, “let me speak with bluntness. Do we *know* this is real?” The tall, elderly woman took the disc. “It could be a replica. Or the legends could be false.”

“If it is not too bold of me to say,” Zeal replied, “I offer dissent. It would not be fake. Why would the Cinder King have cause to think anyone would steal it? Few even know about his pet project.”

“This was my sister’s plan,” Rebeke said. “This is our way to freedom. Our *only* way. Zeal…you *did* it!”

Curious. Nomad was piecing things together. This hadn’t simply been a rescue operation—indeed, the rescue might have been intended to cover up a more interesting heist: the theft of this item, which he knew for a fact to be a Scadrian authorization key. Plastic key cards were, of course, eschewed by them. They had a fetish for metal.

This disc would open a door somewhere. And the people at the table seemed to know it, even if they didn’t understand completely what they were doing.

“But can we operate it?” Compassion asked. “Can we find our way in, past the ancient barrier?”

“We don’t even know if the legends are true,” Confidence said. “Yes, perhaps the Cinder King believes them. But I offer this contrast: what proof is there that these mythical lands beneath the ground exist? A place

untouched by the sun? I speak with firm conviction: I will *not* lead this people in confidence without evidence."

"Sometimes," Contemplation said, "no evidence can be found. I offer that, for a time, we must move by faith alone. Elegy—our appointed Lodestar—believed. She is the one the Greater Good trusted to guide our way in the darkness. This was her goal; that is enough for me."

"I find that offering difficult and strange from your tongue, Contemplation," Confidence said. "What of your calling, science and reason?"

Contemplation took the disc and held it reverently, her face—though aged—marked with lines of joy, her eyes dancing and aglow with the fire of new knowledge. Her dyed black hair might have been seen by some as vanity, but Nomad recognized it as a token of self-possession. She knew how she liked to look. And she didn't care that others knew it was artificial. In expressing herself, the artificial became more authentic than the original.

"Even in science," Contemplation said, "faith plays a role. Each experiment done, each step on the path of knowledge, is achieved by striking out into the darkness. You can't know what you will find, or that you will find anything at all. It is faith that drives us—faith in answers that must exist."

She looked to the others in the room, skipping Nomad, but including Rebeke, Zeal, and Jeffrey Jeffrey. The respect she showed them proved that the leaders were not uniquely important in this society; everyone mattered.

"It is a wild hope, these stories of a land untouched by the sun," Contemplation admitted. "But we must ask ourselves. How long will we survive in this darkness? Elegy was right to move us here, but it was an act of desperation. And even now, our people wilt. We cannot grow food. We lose more ships and laborers every time we venture into the dawnlands.

"I offer this grim truth: we will die out here. Yet undoubtedly if we return to our previous corridor, we will be consumed by the Cinder King. We haven't the knowledge of warfare and killing to fight him; we have not been graced with such brutal and carnal instincts.

"I offer a further grim insight: he will never again be taken by surprise as he was today. His killers will stand alert, prepared in wisdom against further hostility. The Cinder King will ne'er again allow a clever hack of their bracers, and his people will ne'er again let themselves become so distracted by their games that they slacken their guard.

“Today was our greatest victory as the people of Beacon. But I offer, in contrast to that peak, that today is the day we begin to fade. Without a solution, we will die. And so I ask: Confidence, is a little faith—a little time spent chasing a legendary reward—not worth the chance that we can avoid our fate?” She turned the disc over. “We trusted Elegy to get us here. We should trust her again and find this Refuge.”

“We should, by duty of our current accomplishments, test this key,” Compassion said. “And Zeal’s team should be commended for their willingness to steal it for us.”

“I offer this reminder:” Confidence warned, “the Cinder King will chase us for that token.”

“If it pleases you to be contradicted,” Compassion said softly, “he would chase us anyway. He desires greatly to destroy us. And that sense of purpose will have been bolstered by today’s events. He *must* destroy us now, lest more of his people question how far his authority extends.”

Nomad listened with interest to the exchange. Yes, they understood what that key was. But they didn’t know the truth of what they’d find by using it. He was confident that even if they did open a door somewhere with the key…it would not give them some mythical “refuge.” That was a modern device, borne by Scadrian surveyors, to let them be located and give them authorization to return to one of their small, exploratory starships.

The conversation moved on as the winds raged even harder, rocking the city. They mentioned a “great maelstrom,” which he understood as a storm, not unlike a highstorm, that followed the sun at dusk. So he’d guessed right—this cloud cover was the aftermath of sunset, and right *at* sunset was some kind of terrible storm.

He imagined the place as a planet with five phases. First: the lands he’d passed, where reflected sunlight grew plants. Second: the constant cloud cover, where rain was scattered. Third: the maelstrom at sunset, where sunlight vanished, leaving a cyclone born of pressure and humidity changes. Fourth: the superheated landscape where the sun reigned. Finally dawn, where men and women were left to die.

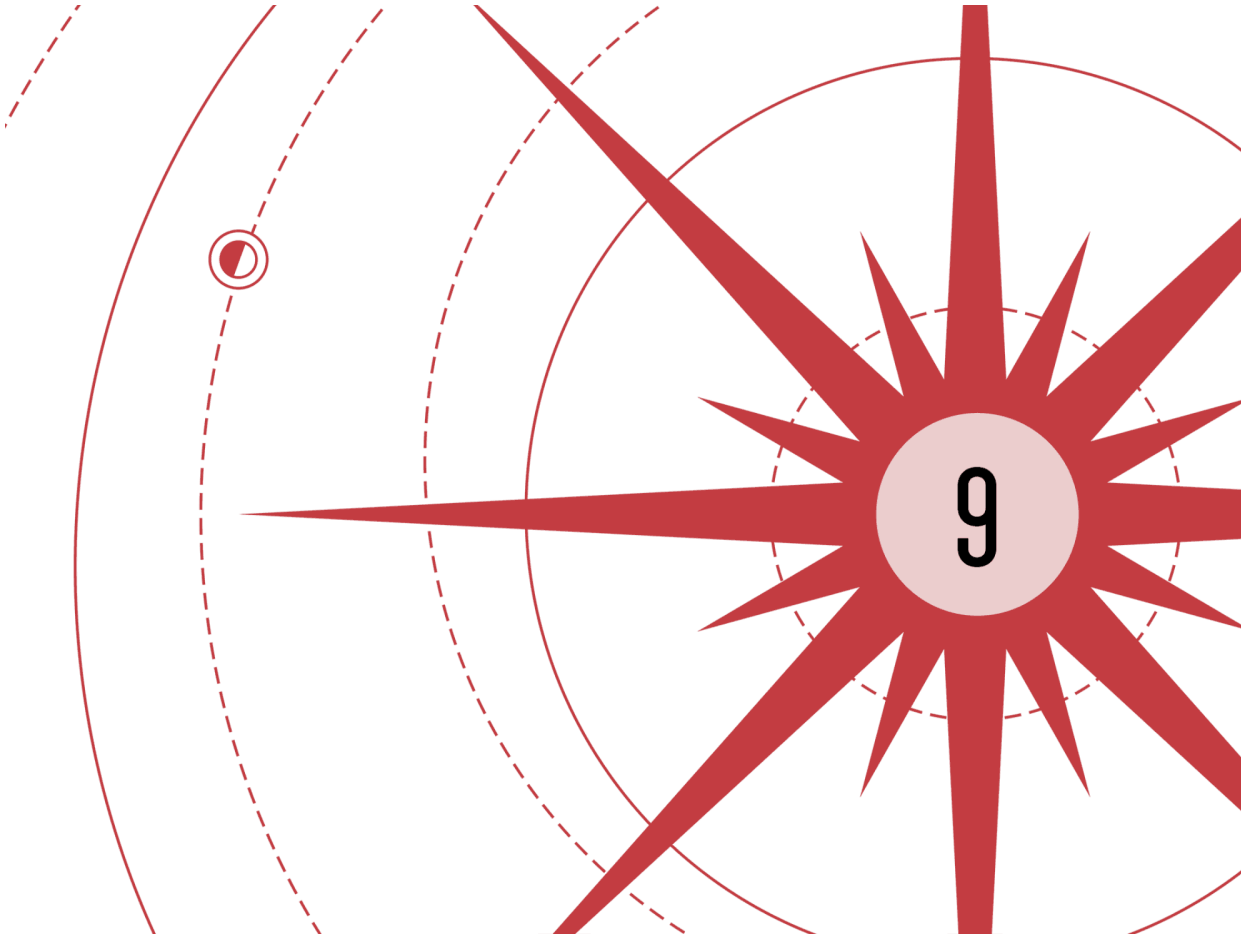
How odd to have found a land where instead of being chased by a storm, the people snuck up on its tail and hid within the edges of its cloak.

Regardless, Nomad’s earlier rudeness—his barbarity in shoving his way into this room—suddenly seemed shameful. Yes, he had moved on from the man he’d once been, overly concerned with propriety and order. He knew that, like a teen leaving home for the first time, he often went too far in

trying to prove himself. He still rebelled against the man he'd been and, in his selfishness, had become a man who could blunder about like a blind chull.

Nomad moved his boots off the table, feeling a loathing for himself that—remarkably—even *he* couldn't blame on his circumstances. Not this time. He stood up and—surprising the people in the room—strode to the door and pushed his way out. Through the hallway, through the lightlock.

Into the storm.



WALKING INTO A STORM wasn't something usually done on Nomad's homeworld. Yet he'd traveled the cosmere enough by now to know that even a violent storm on other planets was nothing compared to those of Roshar.

Indeed, the wind buffeted him here, but it did not lift him from his feet. The rain pelted him, but did not threaten to scour away his skin. Lightning flashed in the sky, but did not strike so often and so near that its deadly touch seemed inevitable. He did wish he had something more than these ragged clothes, stolen from the cavern planet where he'd been last. They did little to keep off the chill. But then again, most of the cold he felt now came from within.

He started down the miserable street, the metal slick beneath his boots. At least his boots were holding up. He'd learned long ago during his travels: skimp on shirts if you must, but never on footwear. He made his way vaguely toward the edge of the city, though he had to go slowly, waiting for lightning to illuminate the path.

The dim lights he'd seen earlier had vanished. People were inside, locked up, hunkered down against the rain. *That* was universal. Whether on a planet where the rainfall could dent metal plates, or on one where it barely left you damp, people fled a storm. Perhaps they disliked the reminder that no matter how lofty their cities, they were mere motes in the grand expanse of planetary weather patterns.

He'd come out here hoping he'd feel better in the rain. Hoping that its pelting would feel like the embrace of an old friend—that the wind's howl would sound like the chatter of men having stew at a fireside. But today those memories came harshly into his mind. The winds made him remember who he had been: a man who would have died before treating people as he'd done today.

No, the storm did not offer him refuge. As much as he liked the rain—as much as it felt *right* to him—the memories were too painful.

He finally arrived back at the place where they'd left the hovercycle attached to the city's side, lending its thrust to the rest. Bold, to keep this place in the air during a literal thunderstorm. Still, the air didn't seem as electric as it might have in another storm—there were long stretches between lightning strikes.

By the cloud glow, he saw that the ember woman had been removed from her bonds in the back seat. And the cycle had been cleverly altered, panels placed above each seat, protecting the leather cushions from the elements and making the cycle fit in to the surface of the city. With the windshields folded down and the panels in place, the oversized hovercycle resembled a thick rectangle of steel bolted to the edge of Beacon. Like how a multitool might look like a box before the implements were folded out.

That made him worry as he crawled to the edge of the cycle—careful not to be swept off into the darkness by the wind. Here, he reached down to the very bottom of the vehicle. To his relief, the rifle he'd stowed there still waited for him. Masked by a stumble to convince Rebeke that he was clumsy, he'd feigned an accidental drop—then used Auxiliary as a specialized claw to latch it into place beneath the hovercycle.

The mechanism he'd formed from Auxiliary to hold the gun in place vanished. He raised the rifle, hand slick with rainwater.

And so, the knight says dramatically, his clever plan is fully executed. And for some reason, his dull-minded squire is now armed with a weapon he can't fire.

"They'd have disarmed me when we arrived," he said.

And again…such a clever plan…to get a weapon that one can't use. All it took was stranding me alone in the rain, to be soaked all the way through—then doing the same to yourself by the looks of you.

"I needed a shower anyway," Nomad said, wiping the water from his face, then running his fingers through the stubble on his head. His hair had been burned away in the flash of sunlight. *Sunlit Man.* He shook his hand, still kneeling on the hovercycle, feeling at the panels covering the seats of the cycle. Could he get these off?

Did he want to?

The lightning flashes left afterimages in his mind of a man he'd once been. A man that, in all honesty, he didn't *want* to go back to being. Naive. Overly concerned with rules and numbers. Locked down by responsibility in a way that had slowly constricted him with anxiety, like barbed wire on his soul.

He didn't like who he'd become. But he didn't miss who he'd been either—not really. He'd lived, grown, fallen, and…well, changed.

There had to be a third option. A way not to put his former life on a pedestal, but *also* not to be a personified piece of garbage.

What if he did climb onto this cycle and vanish into the darkness? What would that get him? Here he had people who seemed—in a small way—willing to trust him and let him in. Maybe because they were desperate. Probably because he hadn't given them much choice.

Beyond that, though, he got the sense that they weren't practiced in fighting or killing. Yes, they'd pulled off a daring rescue and an even more daring thievery. For that, he commended them. But he'd seen the panicked way the captives had responded to the ember people—mirrored in the way that everyone treated him. This was not a group accustomed to violence.

In many places, a struggle for survival brought out people's most brutal aspects. Yet among this group, he saw something remarkable. Was it possible that being forced to always move—being forced to work together for survival—had forged them into a society that didn't have *time* to kill one another? That perhaps this planet had created people who weren't weak—that sun surely would not abide weakness—but who also valued life?

If he wanted a power source strong enough to get him offworld, he would need allies. And he had a feeling that going to the Cinder King for help would not turn out well.

He stepped back from the cycle, resting the rifle on his shoulder. Then he felt something. A tugging on his insides. A kind of…strange warmth. The

storm seemed to slacken, the rain falling off.

Damnation. It wasn't possible. Not here on this world. This was a common storm, not the mythical tempest of his homeland. Things didn't happen in the darkness of common storms like they did there…

Hey, the knight asks confusedly, what are we doing? Nomad? What's our next step?

He saw a light to his left. Farther along the rim of the city. Drawn to it, like a weary traveler drawn to a fragrant cookfire, he started walking. That… was a person standing there, wasn't it? Holding something that glowed in his fingers, a sphere. Wearing a uniform, facing away from Nomad, looking out through the darkness.

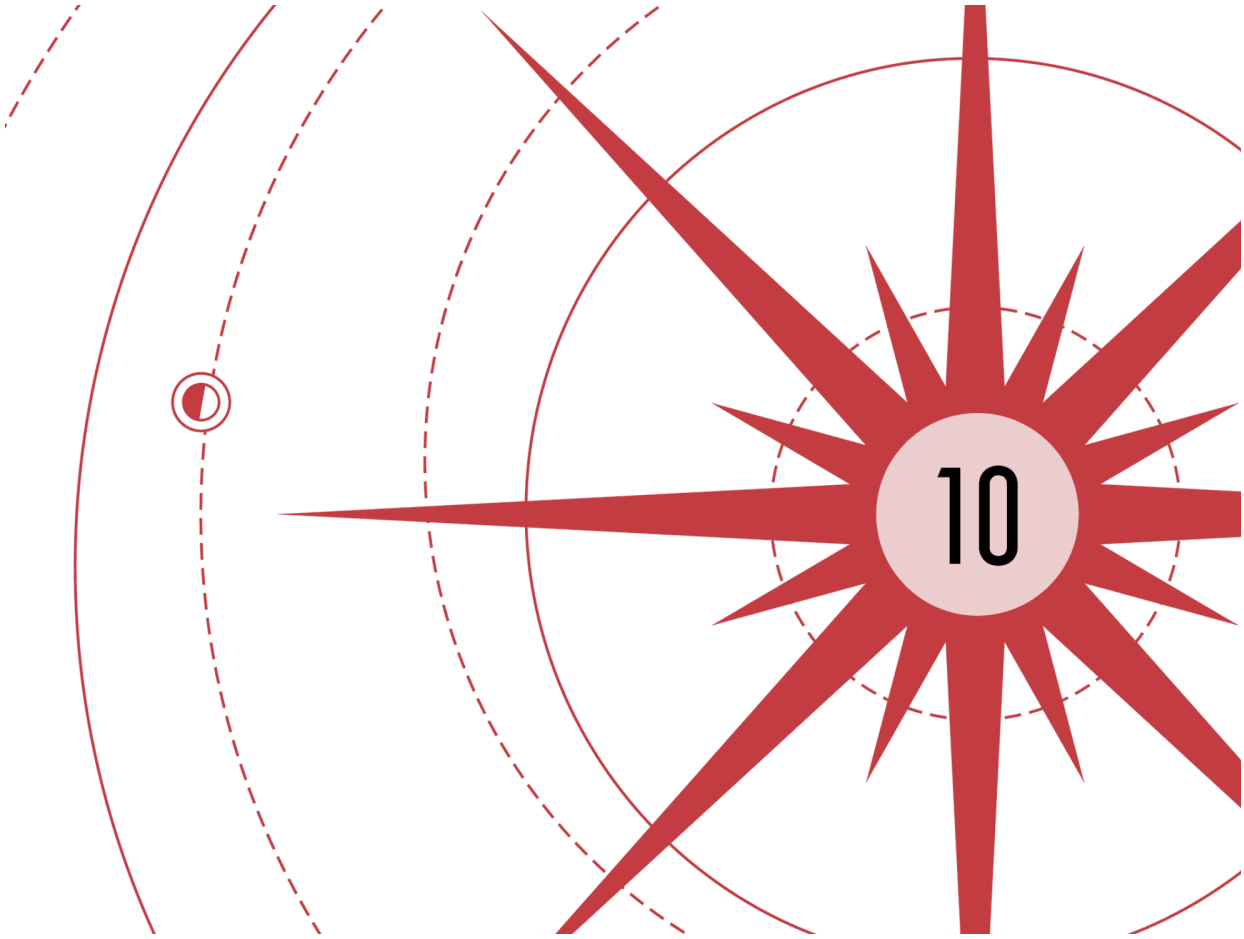
Storms. It couldn't be. *It couldn't.*

Ignoring Auxiliary's second prompting for an explanation, Nomad walked forward. Haunted by what he might find. Worried that he was going mad. Yet desperate to know. Could it…

"Kal?" he asked into the storm.

The figure turned, revealing a hawkish face and an eminently punchable grin.

"Aw, Damnation," Nomad said with a sigh. "Wit? What the hell are *you* doing here?"



"WHAT?" WIT SAID, dusting off his blue uniform—which was untouched by the rain. "A master can't check in on his favorite student now and then?"

He glowed softly, visible even in the darkness, and his substance rippled at the rain's interference. Like he was a reflection on a puddle. This was an illusion, but why now? How had he…

"Auxiliary?" Nomad demanded. "Did you reinforce my Connection to Wit when you were playing with my soul earlier?"

Since I am dead, the knight replies with a huff, I don't really have to care if you're angry at me or not.

Oh, storms. That's what had happened. Now that they had the proper threshold for it, Auxiliary had reached through the distance and let Wit Connect to Nomad.

"So," Wit said, looking him up and down, "that's a…curious outfit."

"It's what you get," Nomad said, "when your clothing gets set on fire by the sunlight, then you are dragged behind a speeding hovercycle for a half

hour.”

“Chic,” Wit said.

“I don’t have time for you, Wit,” Nomad said. “The Night Brigade is out there. Hunting me. Because of what *you* did to me.”

“You may have saved the cosmere.”

“I absolutely did *not* save the cosmere,” Nomad snapped, finding a pebble in his pocket and throwing it through Wit’s head. The image rippled and then restored. “I might have saved *you* though.”

“Same difference.”

“It’s not,” Nomad said. “It’s really not.” He stepped closer to Wit’s projection. “If they catch me, they’ll be able to connect the Dawnshard to you. And then they’ll be on *your* tail.”

Wit didn’t respond. He clasped his hands behind his back and stood up straight, a trick he’d taught Nomad years ago to convince an audience you were thinking about something very important.

“You’ve had a hard time of it lately,” Wit said, “haven’t you, apprentice?”

“I’m *not* your apprentice,” Nomad said. “And don’t pretend to care now. You didn’t do anything when my friends and I were dying to arrows all those years ago. I went to Damnation then, and you sat around playing a flute. Don’t you *dare* presume to imply you *care about me* now! I’m just another tool to you.”

“I never did get a chance to apologize for…events in Alethkar.”

“Well, it’s not like you had the opportunity to,” Nomad said. “After frequently talking to my superior officer, asking him to pass messages to me. After living together in the same city for years and never stopping by. You left me to rot. And it ate you away from the inside, didn’t it? Not because you care. But because someone knew what you really were, then had the audacity not to die and simplify your life.”

Wit actually looked down at those words. Huh. It wasn’t often that one could stab him with a knife that hurt. Took familiarity. And truth. Two things Wit was far too good at avoiding.

“There was a boy, once,” Wit began, “who looked at the stars and wondered if—”

Nomad deliberately turned and walked away. He’d heard far, far too many of this man’s stories to care for another.

“I was that boy,” Wit said from behind. “When I was young. On Yolen. Before this all began—before God died and worlds started ending. I…I was that boy.”

Nomad froze, then glanced over his shoulder. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, but droplets of it still interrupted Wit's figure.

He didn't often speak of his past. Of…those days long ago. He claimed to not remember much about his childhood—a time spent in a land of dragons and bone-white trees.

"Are you lying?" Nomad called to him. "Is this a fabrication? The perfect hook designed to reel me in?"

"No lies, not right now," Wit said, gazing up at the sky. "I can remember…sitting on a rooftop. Looking up and wondering what the stars were.

"I assumed I'd never know. The town philosophers had talked themselves hoarse arguing the matter, as was often their way. Talk until you can't talk anymore, and then hope someone will buy you a drink to keep the words flowing." He smiled at Nomad, eyes twinkling. "Yet here I am. Millennia later. Walking between the stars, learning each one. I got my answers eventually. Yet…I'd guess that, by now, you've seen more of the cosmere than I have."

"So it's a blessing?" Nomad asked, gesturing to himself. "This Torment you've given me?"

"Every Torment is," Wit said, "even mine."

"Wonderful. Very comforting. Thanks for the chat, Wit." Nomad continued on his way. As he walked, he found Wit appearing farther along the rim in front of him, turning to watch him pass.

"You always wanted the answers," Wit said. "That's why I took you on. You thought you could find them, tease them out, write them down, and catalogue the world. So certain you could find every one, if you just tried hard enough…"

"Yes, I was an idiot, thank you. Appreciate the reminder."

Wit, of course, appeared ahead of him again—though he was fading, his form becoming transparent. The little burst of Connection Auxiliary had used to make this meeting happen was running out, blessedly.

"It's a good instinct," Wit said, "to search for answers. To want them."

"They don't exist," Nomad said with a sigh, stopping to look at Wit. "There are too many questions. Seeking any kind of explanation is madness."

"You're right on the first point," Wit said. "Remarkable to think that I discovered the secret to the stars themselves. But then found questions abounding that were even more pernicious. Questions that, yes, have no

answers. No good ones, anyway." He met Nomad's eyes. "But realizing that changed me, apprentice. It's not—"

"It's not the answers but the questions themselves," Nomad interrupted. "Yes, blah blah. I've heard it. Do you know how many times I've heard it?"

"Do you understand it?"

"Thought I did," he said. "Then my oaths ended, and I realized that destinations really *are* important, Wit. They are. No matter what we say."

"Nobody *ever* implied they lacked importance," Wit said. "And I don't think you do understand. Because if you did, you'd realize: sometimes, asking the questions is enough. Because it has to be enough. Because sometimes, that's all there is."

Nomad held his gaze. Fuming for reasons he couldn't explain. Exasperated, though of course that part was normal when Wit was involved.

"I'm not going back," Nomad said, "to who I was. I don't *want* to go back. I'm not running from him. I don't *care* about him."

"I know," Wit said softly. Then he leaned in. "I was wrong. I did the best with the situation I had, hoping it would prevent calamity. I ruined your life, and I was wrong. I'm sorry."

How…odd it was to hear him be so forthright, so frank. Sincere. Completely sincere. Storm that man, how did he keep surprising Nomad, even after all this time?

Nomad turned to go, but then stopped, waiting for the final word. Wit *always* had the final word. This time, though, the man just gave Nomad a wan, sorrowful smile, then faded to nothing. Perhaps he knew there was nothing more of any use he could say, and so had fallen silent. If so, it was probably the first time *that* had happened in Wit's life.

Nomad sighed. He expected a wisecrack from Auxiliary, but the spren stayed silent as well. He usually did when Wit was around—he knew Nomad often felt double-teamed in situations like that.

"Damnation," Nomad said, "we need to get off this planet. And I know how we can do it."

How? the knight asks, wondering if his squire has missed the entire point of an important conversation.

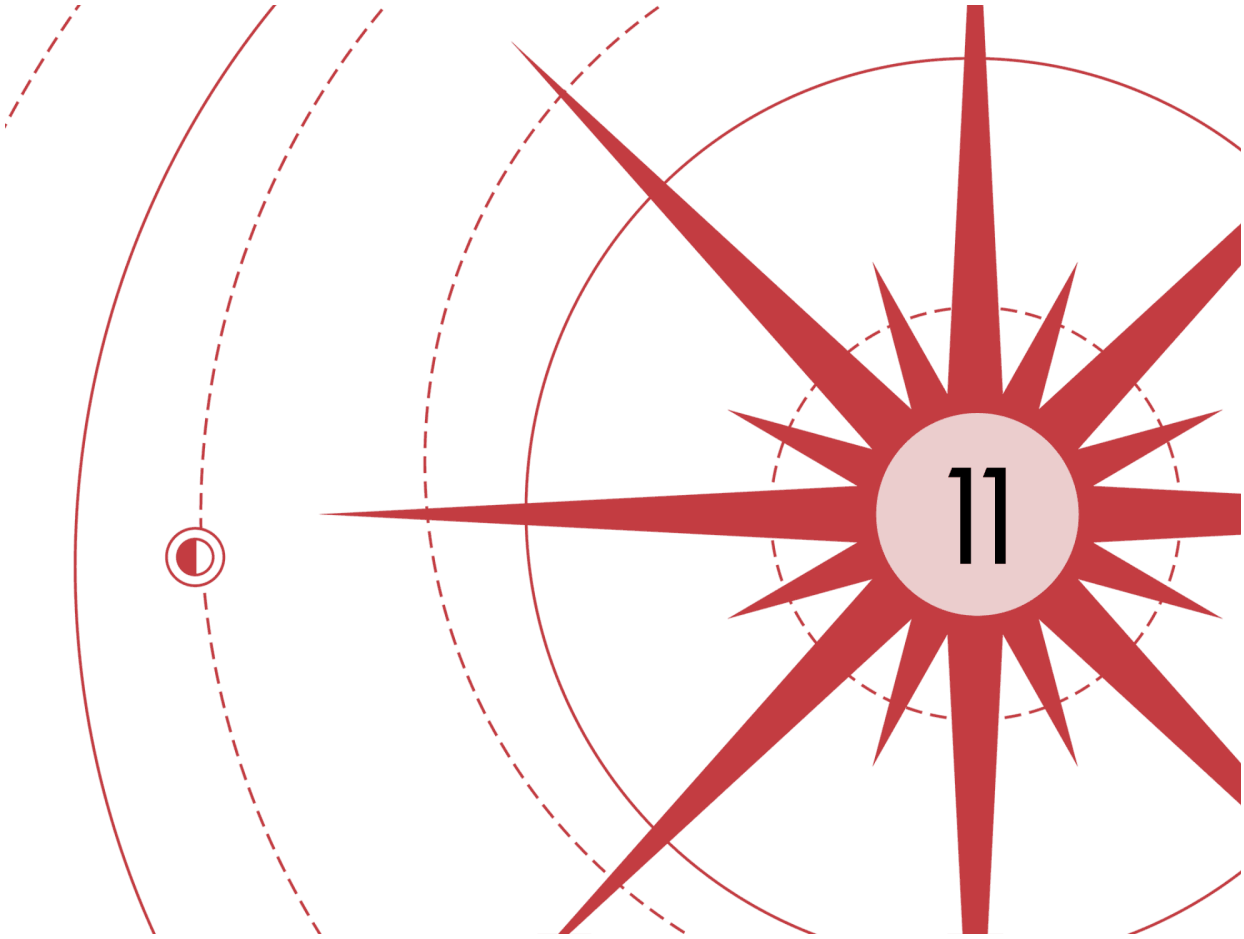
"The people running this place found an access disc that looks very familiar. Scadrian writing on it. And you can bet if there's a power source on this planet powerful enough to get me offworld, it will be with them."

Ahhh… Auxiliary said. *So what do we do?*

Nomad stalked to the building he'd left behind, picking it out easily because he'd left the doors cracked open by accident. He stomped inside, trailing water, rifle under his arm. He burst in on the people still in conference, his arrival causing them to stumble back in surprise and fear. Not a single one reached for a weapon.

Yeah, they were doomed. But maybe their desires aligned with his. He grabbed the access disc off the table, held it up, and spoke in their tongue—perfectly, without accent.

"I know what this is," he said. "It's a key to a large metal door, probably buried somewhere, right? With similar writing on it?" He tossed the key onto the table, where it hit and flipped, clattering against the wood. "I'm going there too. Maybe we can help each other."



CONTEMPLATION THREW HERSELF to her feet, pointing. "I knew it! I knew it! Your features, that gibberish you spoke. You're too odd to be from another corridor. You're one of *them*. A Sunlit Man."

"A legend," Confidence said, folding her bony arms.

"So is our exodus from Hell," Contemplation said. "Both so far back in time, even the Chorus doesn't remember the dates."

"Someone want to tell me what a Sunlit Man is?" Nomad said, frowning. He kept his eyes on Zeal, the one person in the room who had not jumped at his entrance. The short man had his hand in his pocket, presumably on the device that could freeze Nomad in place.

"Accept this explanation," Compassion said with her small, frail voice. "Long ago, a people existed who could live in the sunlight. People who could take it into themselves, rather than being destroyed by it. People who could use it. They were able to *stay* in one place long enough to build a city

beneath the ground. These are the Sunlit Ones—those who could survive the light."

"I was touched by that sunlight, yes," Nomad said. "But it nearly destroyed me."

"You touched sunlight and were not instantly killed?" Jeffrey Jeffrey whispered, looking to Nomad with eyes wide. "It's true?"

"For a few seconds only!" Nomad said.

"Sunlit," Compassion whispered.

"With all respect and mindfulness," Confidence said, "I find this entire story to be a notion for children, not a fact for adults. If these people went under the ground, mud would suffocate them."

"No," Contemplation said. "There are places where the ground is all stone. There could be holes in it, like lava tubes. Places where people live. I've always felt I would see one, before my time arrived."

"Stone melts in the sunlight," Zeal said.

"The stones of the Sunlit People don't," Contemplation continued. "They are deep. The Cinder King believes this; that's why he's spent years trying to find a way through that door. And this man here, he came from the Refuge of Stone!"

"Yeah, you're wrong," Nomad said. He'd expected outcries when he'd come barging in, maybe a fight. Not…whatever this was. "But I don't particularly care what you believe. Do you know where this door is? The one the disc opens?"

"We have some idea," Compassion said softly. The smallest and oldest of the women considered him, then smiled. "It was the plan of Elegy, our Lodestar. To steal the Cinder King's key and figure out how to use it, gaining entrance to the hidden lands of peace beneath the ground."

"The only way we can escape him," Zeal said with a grunt. "He's the most powerful man in the world now. He controls the corridor at the equator, with the most resources. He forces everyone else to the bands closer and closer to the poles, where even a stumble leads to death…"

Nomad filed that information away. "Well, I want to find that door too. I'll help you get there."

And are you going to tell them? the hero asks sharply, voice laden with implication. Are you going to warn them what they'll find inside? Not a refuge for outsiders, but a small alien installation, likely here to monitor the Investiture that sun is emitting?

“Not our problem,” Nomad said in Alethi. “These people want to find that door. I want to find that door. I’ll help them get there. That’s where our responsibility to them ends.”

Callous.

Auxiliary didn’t push him further, though. He knew as well as Nomad did that their best chance to get off this planet was to get into that installation.

“I find this man intriguing,” Zeal said. “Shall we accept his offer? Perhaps he can help.”

“What can you do for us, stranger?” Confidence asked. “What aid do you offer?”

“For one thing, I can read that,” he said, pointing at the disc. “It belonged to a person named Haridan, a lieutenant. It’s his authorization badge, letting him open the door. I’ll be able to read what is on the door too, and if there are people inside, I can communicate with them.”

“Sunlit,” Contemplation whispered.

The others nodded.

“I offer my opinion that we should take his help,” Zeal said. “We must find this place and escape into it! Would it not be pleasing to us and all our people to pray for the safety of the poor Cinder King as we lock him and his minions outside the very door they’ve spent years trying to enter?”

“Adonalsium will bless us in this endeavor, I feel certain,” Compassion said. “It could lead at last to real rest for our people. No more relying on sunhearts to power our cities. No more outrunning the sunrise. No more… loss.”

“Adonalsium, eh?” Nomad said. “By the way, how’d a bunch of Threnodites end up worshipping the father god of an entirely different planet?”

“We learned before our exodus,” Confidence said. “We were those who believed the words of the first Lodestar. We lived in Hell itself and were led by our faith to a new land.”

“One that’s perpetually on fire?” Nomad asked.

“Adonalsium,” Contemplation said, “*will* remember our plight eventually…”

The cynical squire wisely chooses not *to explain to these people the sad reality of their god’s demise some ten thousand years before. Hint hint.*

Nomad held his tongue.

“Perhaps Adonalsium *has* remembered us,” Zeal said. “Maybe that is why the Sunlit Man is here.”

“Call me Nomad, if you have to call me anything,” he interjected.

They barely seemed to notice. “If he can get us past the doorway…” Jeffrey Jeffrey said, then looked to him. “Can you activate this disc? Open the door? The Cinder King has tried for years and has never managed it. He can find the door, but not pass inside.”

Could he? “I’m almost one hundred percent confident I can get that door open,” Nomad said. “I’m not from the place beyond, like you think, but…I do know the people inside. Some of their kind, at least. I speak their language.”

Contemplation met his eyes. She understood, as the others didn’t seem to, about other languages. She believed. Gazing into those aged eyes, so full of hope, he found himself slipping. His ancient self reasserting just a little.

“Look,” he said to her, “I…don’t think you’ll find what you want beyond that door. It’s…not a refuge, like you want it to be.”

“Do you know that?” she asked. “For certain?”

“No,” he admitted. There *might* be a large installation there. Storms, it could even be abandoned. That seemed very improbable. Most likely it was a survey ship, full of researchers investigating that sunlight. Such ships were tiny. Barely enough room for a complement of two dozen scientists.

“No,” he repeated, “I don’t know for certain. But…I have a lot of experience with this. I don’t think that key will bring you salvation.”

The group shared glances.

“We need to try anyway, don’t we?” Confidence said. Words he was surprised to hear from her, considering her objections earlier. “This really is our only hope?”

“We have dwindling power,” Jeffrey Jeffrey said. “And the Cinder King is enraged. No, we will not live much longer. This *is* our only hope.”

The others nodded. Storms. Well, Nomad had tried. He had spoken up. That was enough.

He’d do his part. Get them to the doorway, then open it for them. After that…well, they were on their own. And he would bear no guilt. It wasn’t his fault they were determined to pin their hopes on an impossibility.

“We must ask the people before we commit for certain,” Compassion said softly. “If it pleases the others, I request this course.”

“I agree with that, in wisdom,” Contemplation said. “There are no tyrants in Beacon, only family. We will bring this to the people and let them decide if we should risk the possible reward of entering the Refuge or if we should

instead surrender to the Cinder King. I suspect the presence of this stranger will help them choose the former."

"Great," Nomad said. "I need something to eat that isn't mud. Something to drink that isn't raining on me. Something to wear that isn't hanging in shreds. Consider that my fee for translating that disc for you."

"And do you have a fee for helping us get to the door?" Rebeke asked.

"I just want into that Refuge," Nomad said. "Also, I'll want these bracers off my arms."

"We don't have the keys to—" Zeal started.

Nomad glared at him. "You hacked the Cinder King's system and knocked out his ember people—"

"They're called the Charred," Rebeke said.

"—whatever they are, you knocked them all out at once. You absolutely can take these off me."

Zeal looked away.

"We have yet to discuss," Confidence said, "how you feigned the inability to speak merely to spy upon our workings."

"Can't be too careful," Nomad said, "when you meet someone new. Eh, Rebeke?"

She glared at him.

He smiled and winked. Then he held out his arms. "So how do I get them off?"

"I'll fetch the attuner," Zeal said with a sigh. "With your blessing, Greater Good."

The three women nodded. He slipped out, leaving Nomad to settle down in a seat at the table. He tipped his chair back against the wall, but didn't put his feet up this time. He was, after all, feeling far more respectful.

"If it is agreeable, Nomad," Confidence said to him, "I should like to inquire regarding the spirit that accompanies you. Rebeke tells us you can materialize objects at will?"

"That's one way of putting it," he replied. "But the way I do it is my own secret. Sorry."

They let it drop, which he found surprising. How did they know that Auxiliary was a spirit? And why didn't they push harder? One thing he'd noticed everywhere his travels took him was the universal fascination with Auxiliary. People often treated his abilities as a sign of divinity, or at least of extreme favor with divinities.

Here, they simply let him brush them off with a single sentence? How odd. They turned to other topics, discussing how they'd gather the people and how to find the entrance to the facility—the Refuge of Stone, as they called it. Apparently it wasn't easy to locate.

Rebeke didn't join the conversation; she turned to getting the others more tea. Curious. Outside, when they'd been running for their lives, she'd seemed a desperate rebel. Now he saw her differently. A young woman in a wet dress, her hat lost in the fighting. She was splattered with mud the rain hadn't washed off, her shoulders drooping, her posture slumped. She had been through a lot today.

What kept her here when she should have, quite justifiably, headed for her bed, or at least a change of clothing? Perhaps it had something to do with her sister. Hadn't they said that the woman—now transformed into one of those Charred—founded this city and came up with their plan to escape into the Refuge? Where did that leave Rebeke?

Her brother died today, he remembered. *She watched his head get vaporized while rescuing their sister.* Yeah, that dull expression, those rote motions. Rebeke was in shock. He knew what that was like. Carrying on by sheer force of will, trying to keep busy. Because if you stopped, if you *did* go to bed, you knew what would happen.

You'd have to face it.

"So, Aux," Nomad said in Alethi as they waited. "Are we going to talk about how you went against my explicit orders and contacted Wit?"

The knight shuffles uncomfortably beneath his squire's pointed question, Aux said. *He tries to reply with confidence, but the nervousness in his voice betrays him.*

"What did you hope would happen?" Nomad asked. "Did you think Wit would sweep in here, prop me up with one of his little morality tales, and I'd just go back to whistling?"

I remember…revelations in light. Transformation.

"Those were rare days," Nomad said, shifting his gun against his shoulder. "Most change doesn't happen with a revelation in light, Aux. Most change happens as a slow, steady slide toward the pit. Like how we age, step by shuffling step toward the grave."

You don't age anymore.

"My body might not," he whispered, "but my soul sure does. It's been rounding that pit for years. Step by step, Aux. We wear away. Ideals are like

statues in the wind. They seem so permanent, but truth is, erosion happens subtly, constantly."

The others continued to confer. "This will be dangerous, Greater Good," Jeffrey Jeffrey was saying. "I offer this as fact: we will have to disassemble the entire city and bring it along, to be ready once the prospectors locate the entrance."

"We will make this clear to the people in our explanations," Compassion said. "Thank you, Jeffrey Jeffrey, for your frank assessment. But this *is* where our hopes must rest. Contemplation is correct. We cannot survive as we are. Our sunhearts die, and our resources dwindle."

"Either we must access this Refuge," Contemplation said, "or we must die by the Cinder King's brutality. He will not accept our surrender, and the people will know that."

"Imagine," Compassion said, "a place beyond his influence. A place where we can prove that our way is better, that we do not require his tyranny or false 'unity' to survive. If Zeal's mission had failed, we would perhaps have to accept worse options. But with that key, we have a chance."

Confidence, tall and intense, turned away from the table. "Which provokes my memory. We have not yet discussed a punishment appropriate for the one who disobeyed our strict commands and in so doing, cleaved unto chaos and jeopardy, sowing both to all who accompanied her."

Rebeke, who had been quietly cleaning up the hotplate and teacups, stiffened. She looked back at the table, then cast her eyes down.

"Hey," Nomad said in their tongue, "maybe give the girl a break. Without her, you wouldn't have me."

"This is not your concern, outsider," Confidence said.

"If you haven't noticed," Nomad said, "I don't really care what you think is or is not my concern." He stood up as Zeal returned, bearing some equipment. Nomad placed his gun on the table, then held out his hands.

Zeal looked to the Greater Good—who nodded their approval—before beginning work on the bracers.

"You keep saying," Nomad continued, "that you're different from the Cinder King. That you resist his tyranny. It seems to me that if you're trying to establish a place different from the one that guy rules, you'd want to avoid punishing a person who is just doing their best to help."

The first bracer came off. Zeal set it on the table with a thump, then moved underneath the other one, working.

“Thank you for the lecture, young man,” Confidence said dryly. “Perhaps, with age, you will come to realize that a *balance* is needed. Tyranny is awful, but not all authority is to be rejected. It is common for the young to have trouble with this concept of moderation.”

“How old do you think I am?” Nomad said, amused.

“Older teens?” Confidence said.

“No, older,” Contemplation replied. “Young twenties.”

Storms. He knew that he looked a *lot* younger with the grey no longer appearing in his hair, but young twenties? He’d been thirty-eight when time had finally stopped tracking him, his soul bending under the Dawnshard’s influence—and that was by his planet’s accounting, which had longer years than most.

Granted, he might have had trouble guessing their ages, living perpetually in darkness. But still.

“I’ve experienced much more of life than you’d expect from my appearance,” Nomad said. “And I’ve seen a great deal of tyranny in the name of, to be blunt, what people called ‘the greater good.’ Names are irrelevant. You want to avoid being considered tyrants? Act like it.”

The other bracer came off. Nomad nodded his thanks to Zeal, who backed away, eyeing him—as if worried he’d grab the rifle immediately and start shooting. A part of Nomad wanted to do just that: fire a few rounds into the ceiling, if only to give these people the shock of their lives. Shake them up. Auxiliary would chew him out, though.

Instead he just shouldered his rifle. “Food. Clothing. Bed. That order.”

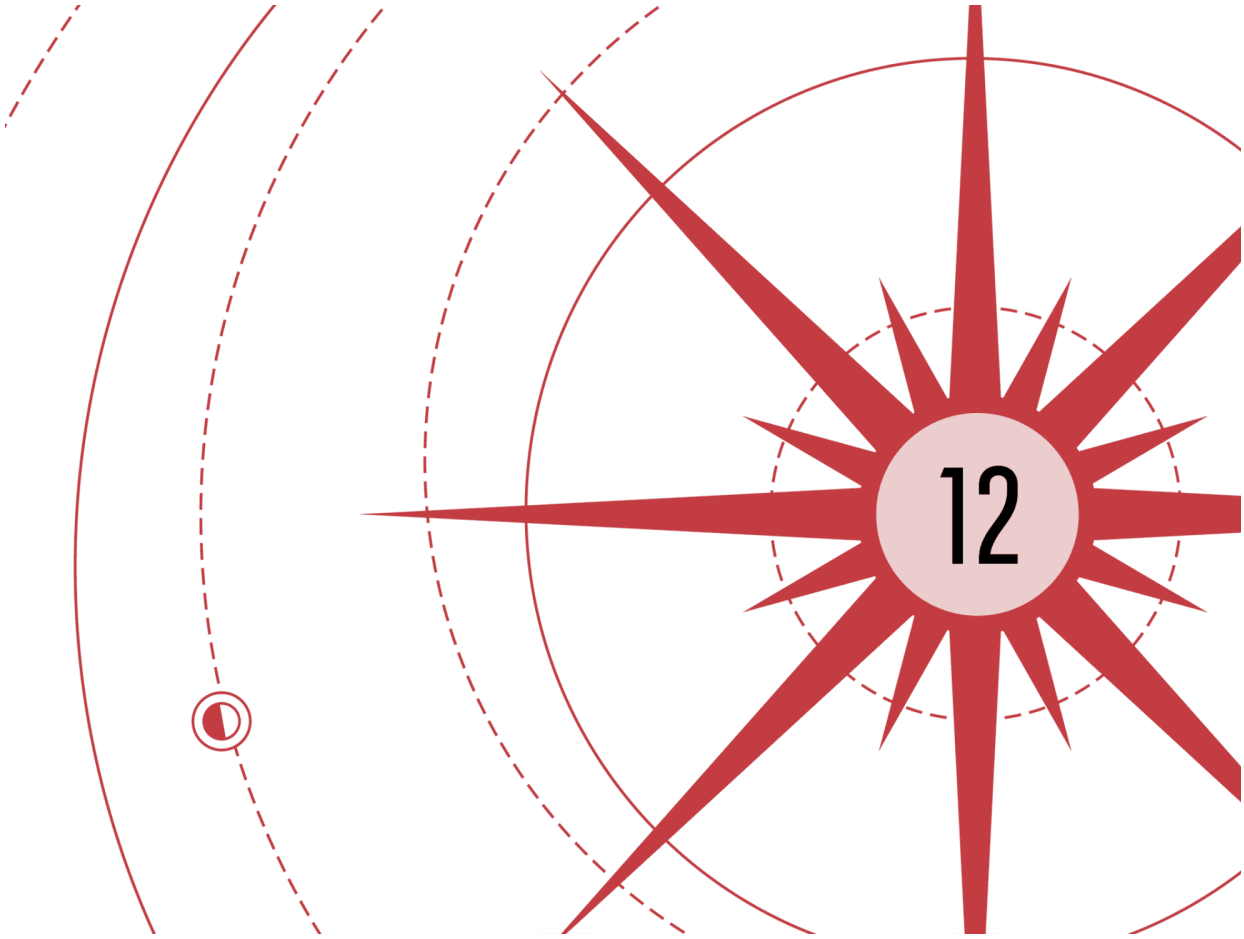
“Rebeke can fulfill that assignment,” Compassion said. “As part of her punishment.”

“Can you fly, outsider?” Contemplation asked.

Nomad froze. He looked to the three of them, his mind racing, emotions surging…until he realized they meant fly a ship.

“I could probably figure it out,” he said, “with a little instruction on the controls. I’ve flown similar craft. Why?”

“Because the region holding the entrance to the Refuge will soon be upon us,” Contemplation said. “We will have to make our case to the people and have a decision soon after. Then we’ll need to divide the city and go hunting for the way. And I’d rather know…”



"...IF YOU NEED a babysitter or not."

Contemplation's smug tone still echoed in Nomad's mind as, three hours later, he and Rebeke burst from the cloud cover back into the light of the rings. Previously faint to him, the illumination now seemed bright as…well, not day. A night with the largest of the moons shining, perhaps.

They were again on Rebeke's quadcycle. As she'd been the one to rescue him, the others seemed happy to make her play nursemaid to him. He wasn't certain what she thought of that. She hadn't said more than a few words to him as she found him a place to rest, then scrounged up some clothing for him. He'd worried they'd have trouble finding something that fit him, but the local seamstresses worked with serious efficiency. Perhaps that's what happened to a society when it was constantly on the run from superheated death.

So he now wore a long brown duster coat with deep pockets, as he preferred. It was the second they'd offered him—the first had looked too

much like a uniform. He was still ashamed of how he'd snapped at Rebeke for that. This one was rather nice. It had been a few worlds since he'd been able to obtain something this suited to his tastes. Under it, he wore sturdy trousers and a light shirt.

As they soared out of the darkness on the large hovercycle, a small fleet of ships followed. He and Rebeke, along with other scouts on hovercycles, had come out first to make sure the Cinder King wasn't here. Now that the way was confirmed clear, though, the rest of Beacon had arrived.

Beacon, it turned out, was made up of around a hundred and fifty people—and around thirty ships. Most of those ships, as he'd seen at the larger city—called Union, he'd since learned—resembled bumblebees more than hornets. But all could fly, and fly well.

He was still amazed that entire cities could just disassemble on command. He told himself that he'd seen tens of planets by now and ought to be too jaded to marvel at each novelty. Yet the truth was that each one had something like this—some fascinating quirk that made him want to linger, study, learn.

If he did, of course, the Night Brigade would take him—all to find the next link in the chain leading to their prize. He was certain their treatment of him would be very illuminating. His insides would get to see the light for the first time.

He turned his mind from that to surveying the landscape. He'd noticed the mud earlier, the leftovers of the passing storm in the darkness. The ground was basically grey slush here, no sign of plants or life at all—but that didn't mean it was boring or flat.

Improvised rivers had already carved channels in the mud, eroding soil, creating networks. It all had the feel of an estuary, where river met ocean. Except without the ocean. There were lakes, though. Shallow expanses of water that reflected the rings above in striking, colorful mimicry.

The landscape had a strange variety to it. He'd imagined this entire place like one big salt flat or mud pit, but they passed steep hills and winding valleys with water running down them. Among them stood strange rock formations, wickedly jagged and pocked with holes. They passed a plain with hundreds of them, like sculptures made by a madman.

What do you think of those? the studiously serious knight asks, somewhat confusedly.

"You know," he replied, "Master Wit always told me to avoid using too many adverbs in descriptions."

And how am I to project my emotions, then? he asks even more confusedly.

"Through context. Tone of voice."

Tone of voice, he says flatly, he said flatly. *I have exactly one tone, Nomad. Being dead has costs, you know.*

"Silence, unfortunately, not being one of them."

The rock formations, Nomad, he says with mounting exasperation. What are they?

"Strange. That's what they are."

Normally he'd have expected those sorts of formations to come from prolonged weathering. But if that were the case, these would have smooth sides, not that craggy, cratered look, like…

Like molten stone, suddenly frozen, he realized, *in the process of being ejected from the earth.* A volcanic eruption, suddenly hit by cold rain and locked in place. *That's* what these felt like to him.

"Hey," he said, switching to the local tongue. He waved to Rebeke, who was in the driver's seat to his left. "Those rock formations. Those are made by the sunlight? Superheating the ground, making magma erupt?"

"Best we can guess," she said, shouting over the rush of the wind. "The coming of the Sky Tyrant causes great distress to the land. Everything melts or breaks apart each day, and by the time we pass again, nothing is the same."

"Wait," he said. "*Nothing* is the same?"

"Nothing," she called. "Though some generalities persist—there are highlands to the south—no individual features remain day to day. Those hills, they weren't here last time. It's all shaped anew. The Chorus tells of our old world. A land of quietude, where the landscape slumbered and didn't transform daily. But that place was also Hell, so…"

"I've been there," he called back. "Food's good, but the ghosts are a huge pain. I'm not surprised your ancestors wanted out."

She gave him a pointed look. "Don't lie."

"Lie?"

"You haven't been to Hell," she shouted.

He shrugged. He'd been through many varieties of hell, though only the planet Threnody was literally called by the term. But who cared if she believed him or not?

That magma thing. How'd you realize it was the case? the knight interjects.

“No erosion on the formations,” he explained in Alethi. “Makes sense that this landscape would be subject to extreme forces. It’s remarkable. Like a primordial planet, still forming.”

What would it be like to live in a place where you could make no maps? A land with no familiar landmarks? Nothing permanent except what you carried with you? Under those circumstances, he’d be looking for a quiet cavern to settle into as well. But it also explained why there weren’t many of those.

If the surface got fried every day to the point it cracked and let molten rock come surging out…well, that wasn’t conducive to stable, habitable caverns. Again, he doubted that this Refuge *could* be any sort of cavern.

Beyond that, a part of him whispered that something didn’t add up here. That he was missing a piece of the puzzle. Superheated light might make stone flow on the surface, but eruptions? He was no expert, but he thought those were usually caused by the *opposite* effect. Heat below and coolness above—with a generous helping of tectonic activity to create new pathways for that heat to escape.

Highly Invested light would also make traveling in the system by starship nearly impossible. Yet he had evidence of Scadrians being here. So what was really going on with the mechanics of this planet?

“I assume,” he said to Rebeke, “the unstable landscape is why we have to search to find the doorway into the Refuge?”

“Yes,” she said, pointing at a nearby group of five ships with round, flat bases. They swept along the ground at a low hover, moving together in a deliberate pattern. “We use prospector ships, which can sense energy sources under the soil. Every now and then, during regular searches, the Cinder King would find the doorway. He became obsessed with it and the stories of the Refuge. That only intensified when he got the key. It came from a body one of his outriders found, a stranger who had died in a mudslide.”

Nomad nodded, thoughtful. Those prospectors were large machines for doing something as simple as sensing Investiture, but not everyone was lucky enough to have a Seeker on staff.

“You were his subjects, then?” he said to her over the wind. “The Cinder King? Before you broke away and hid in the darkness?”

“Essentially,” she said, slowing the cycle to drink from her canteen. Then she continued without having to shout. “He ‘keeps the law.’ Has influence over basically every habitable corridor and has incorporated any cities of significance or size into Union.

“With smaller towns like ours, he’d send a few officials to represent him. Along with some of those Charred of his, of course, ready to enforce their orders. We just lived with it. For years—ever since I can remember, actually—we lived under his thumb. Until he started to change his rhetoric, get more aggressive, claiming that his destiny was to unite all people into one city. So then—”

She glanced to the side as a ship flew past. They’d stowed Elegy, her sister, in there. A kind of improvised prison. Nomad found it wild they didn’t have an actual jail.

“Elegy,” Rebeke said, “always had such grand dreams. She could persuade anyone of anything, so long as she was passionate about it. I hoped so much that we could…do something for her. When I locked her away earlier, she shouted at me. It was her voice, but there’s nothing of her in the eyes. I…” She slumped in her seat, head bowed.

Storms, this girl needed sleep and time to mourn, not another mission. But the sun didn’t wait. They were constrained by its timetable. Maybe she’d be able to rest once they opened the doorway…

But of course she wouldn’t. Because the doorway wouldn’t lead to a refuge. He steeled himself. “The Cinder King,” he said. “He’ll be looking for you out here, right?”

“He’s *always* looking for us,” she replied. “However, Zeal replaced the key he stole with a fake. So with Adonalsium’s blessing, the Cinder King does not yet know what we have done. He will have patrols trying to spot us, but only the regular ones. And perchance we will find fortune today—in that he rarely patrols this region.”

“Why?”

“Because it is the way that his city, Union, will come anyway, once their harvest is finished,” she explained. “Why would we be so foolish as to fly directly into his path? His riders usually search the far reaches of this corridor and those nearby, presuming to find us there, attempting our own harvests.”

They fell silent.

“You can’t flee to another corridor?” Nomad asked. “You said there are places he can’t influence?”

“He influences all,” she said, “but there are some places he doesn’t care about—because they are inhospitable.” She pointed northward. “Travel up that way an hour or so, and it’s all his territory until you reach the deadband, where food does not grow. To be exiled there is a death sentence.”

She turned, pointing south. “The southern band used to be habitable, but a mountain range has sprung up these last few years. It gets higher and higher. Like I said, while individual features vanish, some large-scale ones persist. We keep hoping this mountain range will melt away, but it hasn’t, and so all the people in that corridor had to relocate northward—crowding these corridors. Giving the Cinder King more sway because it is easier to oppress them.”

“Wait,” Nomad said. “Why is a mountain range a big deal? Just fly over it.”

“We can’t fly that high,” she said. “The ships can’t manage it. And it extends far enough that if you try to go around, you inevitably end up getting caught in some valley and dying. So instead we hide in the darkness and dodge his patrols.”

Nomad found that curious. Their technology…some things about it baffled him. That wasn’t, however, an unusual experience for him. The more he’d traveled, the more he’d learned that technology didn’t follow a flat progression. Planets often had extreme knowledge in one area, but ignorance in others. He’d met one society capable of complex mathematics and with a brilliant understanding of architecture—but with no concept of the wheel, as they lived in a dense jungle, where developing it hadn’t made as much sense as it did in places with a lot of flat land and straight roads.

So, the knight muses, they lived under the Cinder King. That—admittedly—sounds bad. But could it truly be worse than the rest of life on this planet? Was his rule so horrible that going off to live in pure darkness was better?

That depended. In Nomad’s experience, it wasn’t when life was utterly terrible that people rebelled. It instead happened when life improved to the point that people had time to think, time to wonder. The capacity to imagine.

So maybe things here had recently progressed enough to make people wonder if they needed a dictator or not.

“The Cinder King,” Nomad said. “He taxed you? How badly?”

“Badly,” she said softly. “The lottery happened once a rotation.”

Lottery?

Well, *there* was a word that varied widely by context. Remembering his experience on Union, he braced himself for the worst. “A…lottery of people?”

She nodded. “What else would it be?”

“And what did he do with them?”

She frowned, studying him. Then she narrowed her eyes. “You…don’t know?”

He shook his head.

“It’s true?” she whispered. “There’s a place where they don’t use sunhearts?”

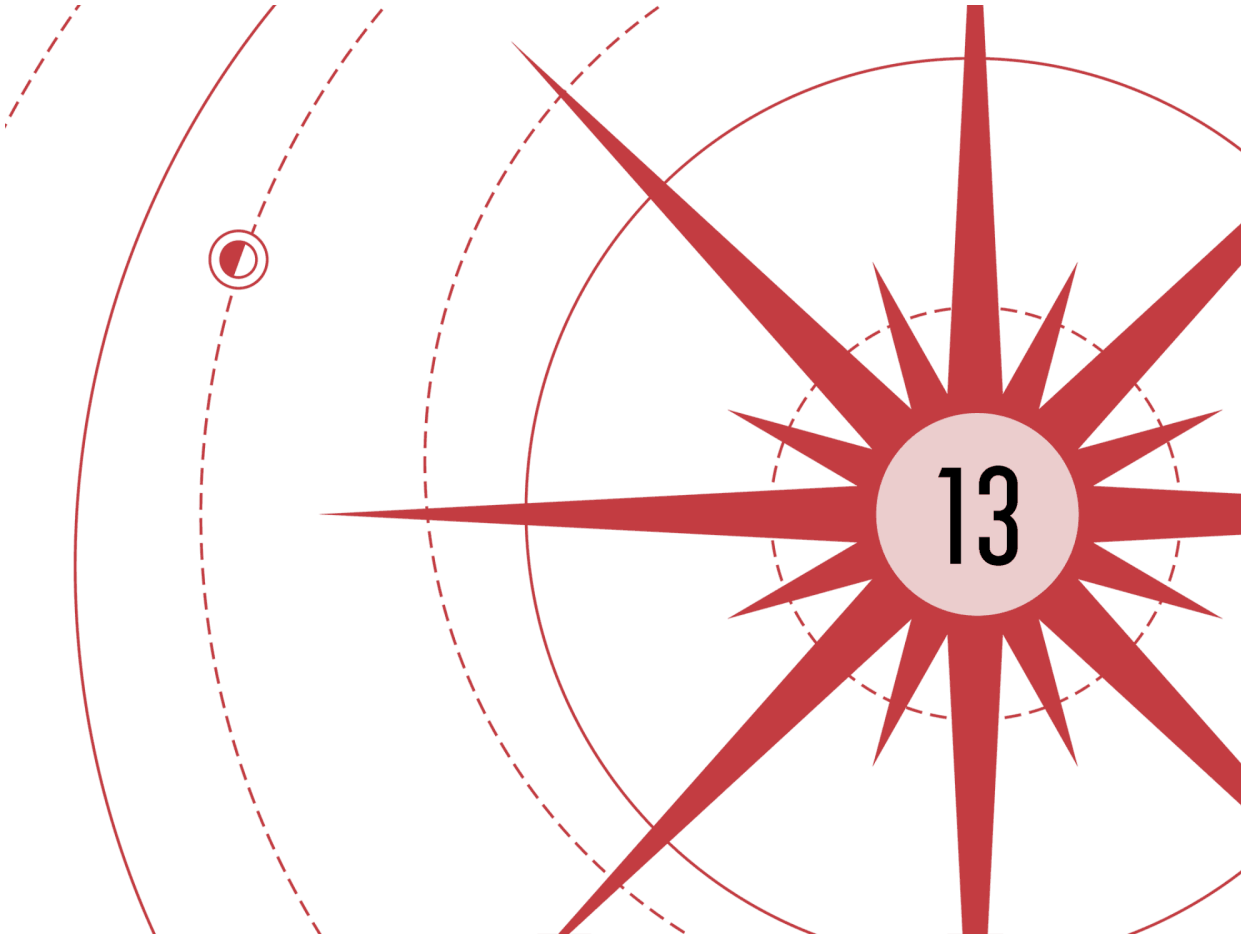
“The power sources?” he said, rapping his knuckles on the cycle’s housing. “I mean, everyone I’ve known uses power of one sort or another, but I’ve never seen these ones. Where do you get them? Is it…” He trailed off.

Sunhearts.

Lottery.

“People?” he asked. “These power sources used to be *people*?”

“This one here,” she said, resting her hand on the housing, “was my mother. Two weeks ago. We left her for the sun, then recovered her sunheart on the next rotation. Her body vaporized by the heat, her soul condensed into this stone.”



STORMS.

Storms.

Suddenly his experiences upon arrival took on an even *more* sinister cast. That's what the Cinder King had been doing. That's what the strange game of tag had been about: choosing the next people to be sacrificed to the sun. Not in some primitive, pagan way—but in a modern one. Equally horrible, but with more economics.

That's terrible, the hero exclaims, imbuing his words with sickened disgust.

It wasn't unprecedented. Nomad hadn't been to Nalthis—the place sounded nice, and nice places tended to be easy for the Night Brigade to find—but they bought, sold, and traded chunks of people's souls like they were gemstones. BEUs as a measurement were based on this system—though at least there, the transaction left you alive.

“That’s why there aren’t any ghosts here,” he said softly in Alethi. “Threnodites, they have this phantom echo to their souls. A sort of smoky shadow that lives on after they die. Here, there’s not a chance for that. Their souls are condensed, fused, turned into…”

A power cell. One of which he’d consumed to make his Connection to this planet. Another event that took on a gruesome air in hindsight. He felt at his coat pocket, where he’d hidden the drained core after getting his new clothing.

One soul’s worth, even with a shade attached, wouldn’t be enough for us to absorb over a thousand BEUs of Investiture like we did, Aux said. *So there must be some other force filling the stone, like Stormlight on Roshar. The sunlight must be Invested, as we guessed. It’s supercharging the remnants of the soul as the person is killed.*

It was the only thing that made sense, as they’d never be able to power entire cities from souls alone. Not without running out of people very quickly. Still, the implications of it left him nauseous.

“Your reaction,” Rebeke said. “It’s genuine, isn’t it? You had no idea what sunhearts were.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then, in truth, there’s hope. Authentic hope. A better life than even Elegy presumed to offer.”

“Your city…still uses such sacrifices?” Nomad said.

“What else are we to do? We can’t outrun the sun without power. Unlike the Cinder King’s lottery, my people have always used volunteers. From among the elderly, the sickly.” She absentmindedly traced the outline of the sunheart’s housing. “Mother was dying. She might have had months left, she might have had days, she might have had years. But we had three spent sunhearts and ships that couldn’t flee. So…” She took a deep breath.

“So you leave people out to die,” he said. “They become these…power sources. How do you find them again?”

“The prospector ships,” she said. “It’s why we have them. Sunhearts float near the top of magma for some reason. You can find them in roughly the same place you left the people, though you often have to pry them from the stone.” Her hand stilled. “My brother installed Mother’s sunheart here, in our quadcycle, so I could have it near me. Now that he’s…he’s gone, and Mother, and even Elegy…”

This storming world, the knight says with a breathless voice. Indicating horror, not arousal, since that word is sometimes used both ways. Just in

case you were wondering.

"When they captured me," Nomad said, "the Cinder King took off his glove and seized me by the face. He expected something to happen. It didn't."

That comment shook Rebeke out of her melancholy, prompting her to stare at him again. She looked at his hands. Ungloved. Clearly curious, Rebeke removed her right glove, then hesitated.

"May I?" she asked.

He shrugged. So she reached across and touched his wrist.

"Nothing," she said, amazed.

"And what is *supposed* to happen?"

"I should be able to draw out your heat," she said. "Some of your soul. As I initiated the touch, I should be able to pull it forth from your body, cooling you—it's what the bracers do. They did work on you, though?"

"Unfortunately," he said. "What is being drawn from you is something we call Investiture. A different state of energy, and the removal of it cools you in the process. That's a side effect, though. Because of your heritage, your people have an interesting type of Investiture—as do I, though mine is of a different variety."

"Why did the bracers work on you," she said, "but my touch does not?"

It was tough to say. Though he'd once made a study of this sort of thing, it had been decades since he'd given it much thought. And the various nuances of Investiture could be tricky even for an expert.

"Investiture is finicky," he said. "Usually requires specific things—Intent, Commands, familiarity—to manipulate. It's likely that the bracers were brutal enough to force through my protections, but your touch isn't."

She pulled her hand away from him and blushed, quickly putting her glove back on. "It's unusual," she said, "to do that."

"What?" he asked. "Touch someone?"

She nodded, embarrassed. "Normally it only happens because of accidents."

"I saw the Cinder King do it intentionally," he said. "Killing people in the arena, consuming their Investiture."

"Yes," she whispered. "He can draw forth heat quickly, powerfully, by force. He can feed upon a human being, leave them a dead husk. He has… fed on thousands of people at this point."

Wow, Aux said. *Thousands? Watch that one, Nomad. If he's that highly Invested…he could be seriously dangerous.*

“Regardless,” Rebeke continued, “any touch can lead to heat being drawn or given—even for a normal person and even if not intended. It is rare for it to be dangerous, though.”

“So, wait,” Nomad said. “If you touch, you start draining Investiture from one another?”

“There are prayers to formalize it,” she said. “But…yes, a prolonged touch can cause it to begin. Accidents. Or…intimacy.”

“You freeze each other during sex?”

Well, that’s new, the hero says to his overly blunt valet. Certainly didn’t have that on the list of cultural features I was expecting to find on this world.

Rebeke’s face grew redder. “In truth, we pass heat back and forth. It’s… not something I should have to explain to you.”

“Fair enough,” he said, thinking. These people had a natural, biological ability to leech Investiture from one another. Almost everything had some Invested component, but the extremities of experience—specifically the strange things he could do *and* the strange things that had been done to him—were *deeply* related to the nature of Investiture.

That included his Torment. There was a physical component. A mental component. But the real shackles were spiritual—Investiture. So maybe…

A plan began to form in his mind. A way to potentially escape his affliction. Or at the very least lessen the symptoms of it.

Nomad, the knight interjects—likely interrupting musings about his incredible nature—I see something. Ship twenty degrees to your right. Very distant.

Nomad focused on the direction Auxiliary had indicated. While Aux didn’t have a physical shape unless Nomad called him as an object, the spren could use Nomad’s body to experience the world. Aux had been keeping watch, even if Nomad hadn’t.

Nomad spotted it: a small ship approaching in the distance. “Scout,” he said to Rebeke. “I think it’s observing us. You should warn the others.”

Rebeke followed his gaze, then cursed softly. She flipped a switch on the side of her seat, and the fuselage to Nomad’s left split open. Rebeke’s seat and the metal around it *unlocked* from the main body of the cycle. Sections at the front and sides folded out simultaneously, forming into her own one-person hovercycle, sleek, efficient.

As he’d guessed, this quadcycle could eject the four portions with seats. The vessel wasn’t so much one large hovercycle as it was a carrier of four smaller ones.

“Impressive,” he said. “Can *everything* on this planet break apart into smaller, functional pieces? If we crash this thing, is it going to disintegrate into a hundred even *smaller* cycles?”

“Call in what you saw to warn the others,” she said to him, then leaned down, ready to go after the scout.

“Don’t go right for it!” Nomad shouted. “It’s observing. See how it’s descending to the terrain to be harder to spot? It’s probably reporting in via radio. I’d bet that scout thinks they’ve caught us planting seeds. If you go screaming toward it, the scout will *know* it’s been spotted.”

She paused, seeing the wisdom in that. “It can’t be reporting in,” she said. “We have our entire city here, including our radio jammers. That will disrupt their signals.”

Nomad wondered again at their varied technologies. Then again, maybe they weren’t using actual radio waves, and his mind interpreted the word that way for convenience. Might be some kind of Connection-based communication, if it was powered by these sunhearts.

“Then it’s even more important not to alert the scout they’ve been seen,” he said. “Here. Let me show you.”

He turned and looked down by his leg, in the same location where she’d reached to unlock her cycle. There, he found a handle, almost flush with the side of the craft. At her nod, he turned it, and his own cycle disconnected from the central fuselage.

The resulting single seater was more like the hovercycles he’d flown on other worlds. He pulled it out beside hers.

“This is as small as they get,” she noted. “These don’t even have their own sunhearts; they have a battery that will last you about an hour before needing to reattach to the main vehicle to recharge.”

“Great,” he said. “Follow me.” He turned his cycle vaguely toward the distant scout ship. He made a wide loop, as if he were going to check on the prospectors.

She followed, and as they passed the point closest to the still-distant scout, she pulled up beside Nomad. “Now?” she asked, eager.

“No,” he said. “We’ll do one more loop. Make it seem like this is a normal part of our routine. This time, we’ll swing out wider, though.”

She nodded, watching the scout intently.

“Didn’t you just recently get into trouble for exceeding your orders?” he asked. “They’re going to yell at you again.”

“If it pleases you to know, it is ever my lot,” she said. “Should I care?”

He smiled. “I don’t see why you should.”

She suddenly seemed uncertain. “I…I offer the concern that the scout might be a Charred. What would we do then?”

“Then we’ll ask if they want some tea,” Nomad said. “What do you *think* we’ll do? We’ll kill the bastard before they kill us.” He leaned in, watching her. She was *eager*. Maybe it was the recklessness of someone who had nothing left to live for. Maybe it was a thirst for vengeance. Most likely it was just wanting to do something—anything—to keep her mind off her loss. He’d been there. Too many times.

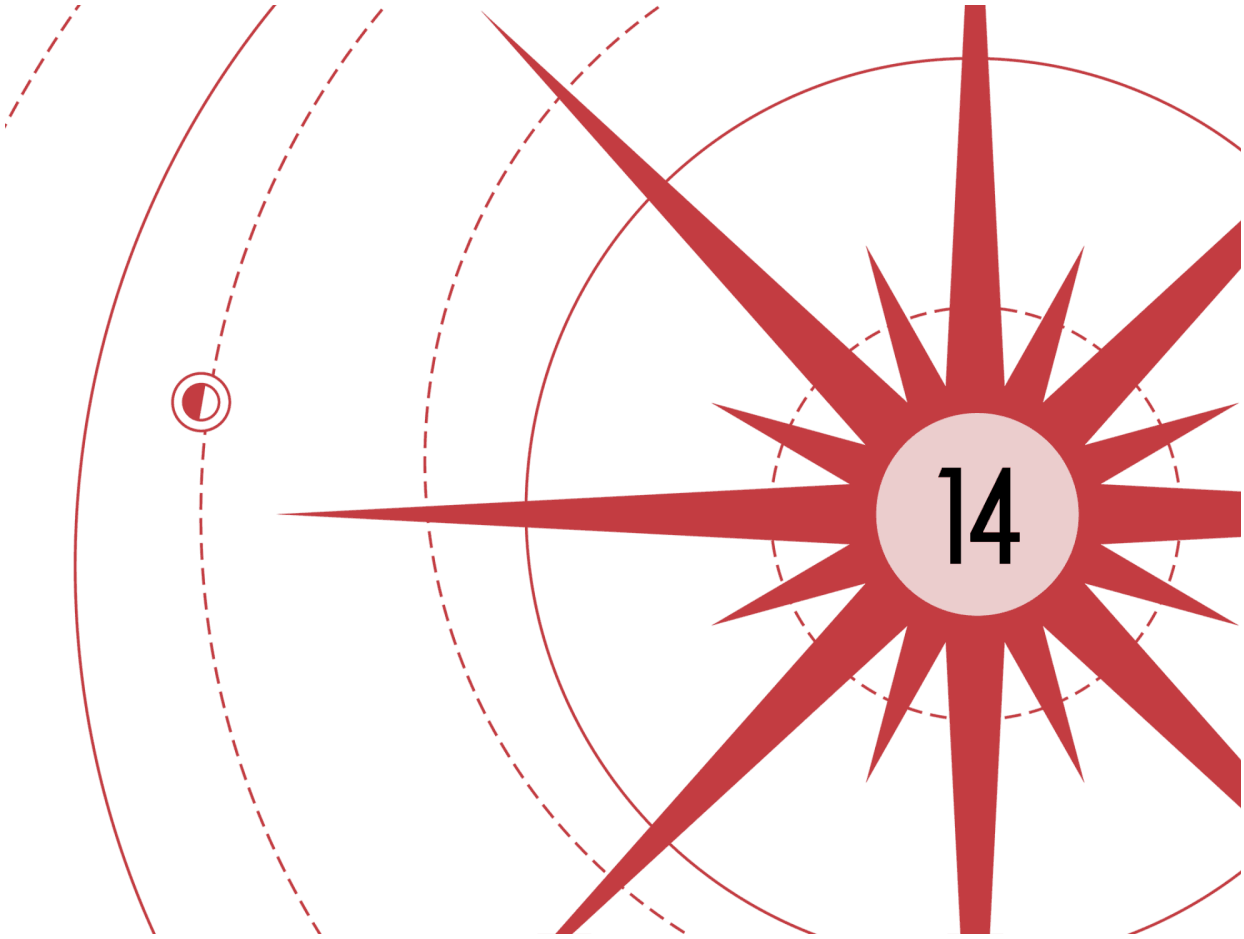
There is something odd about the way these people act, the knight muses to himself. I assume you’ve noticed.

“Yes,” he said in Alethi. “There’s a kind of strange timidity to them. Even the sharpshooters don’t really feel like soldiers—I wouldn’t be surprised to find they are repurposed hunters.” After all, they used the term “killer” like it was a dividing line. As if some people were capable of it, and some people weren’t.

Either way, he sensed a hunger in Rebeke. A desire to act, to fight back. He led her in another wide loop, getting closer to the scout’s location. The hovercycle controls were surprisingly intuitive. He supposed that made sense; if your entire society relied on constant flight, then you’d want your ships to be simple to fly.

The scout had taken cover beside a rock formation, like a large wave of magma that had been frozen in place. They were much closer now, but a distance still separated them—perhaps equal to what they’d already covered. Getting closer would be suspicious.

“All right,” Nomad said to Rebeke. “*Now!*”



TOGETHER THEY BOLTED to the side, punching their cycles to maximum speed, zipping straight toward that scout.

He saw them immediately. A gaunt man in a white coat with red stripes, he spun his hovercycle and fled, keeping low to the ground and darting into what appeared to be a large lava tube. That was dangerous, but would reduce the chance of being shot from above or behind.

Nomad swung in low to follow, and Rebeke joined him, an intense expression on her face, wind playing with her black and silver hair. Nomad let himself smile. It felt good to be in the air. Moving. A second later, they darted into the lava tube—a large circular stone tunnel. Broken in many places, open to the sky, twisting and turning. Requiring hairpin turns and careful judging of speed not to slam into the wall.

You remember, the knight notes with a roll of his eyes, when we first met? You told me you were "the sensible one" who "didn't rush headlong into every fight that came your way."

"Nope," he said. "Doesn't sound like something I'd say."

Yeah, and what happened to wanting to lie low? Taking the easy road? Does that sound like the current you?

"Just trying to keep this girl alive."

That's remarkably uncynical of you.

"Eh. I'm bored."

Nomad took another turn, barely keeping sight of the scout ahead in the shadowed tunnel, dark enough between broken sections of rock that only the glow of an engine indicated their quarry.

A moment later, a voice sounded over the radio. "What are you doing?" Contemplation demanded, barely audible against the rushing air.

"We're checking on something," he replied, thumbing the communication button. "A scout, we think."

"Sunlit Man," Contemplation said, "you are needed to open the doorway."

"Have you found it yet?"

"No. The landscape is extremely difficult this time."

"Well, we won't get the chance if the Cinder King arrives. So it's best if we stop this scout before he can report."

"And if you die? You promised to activate the key—without you, we'll be locked out."

"If I die," he said, "that immediately stops being my problem, then, doesn't it?"

"Reckless fools," she muttered. "If it pleases you—and I doubt *anything* does—you should stop encouraging Rebeke. She's all we have left of her family, and I should prefer to see her safely ensconced in the Refuge before my time arrives."

Feeling the epiphany like a punch to the gut, he realized what she was referring to: her time to die in the sunlight, to become a powerpack for her people. This society was all kinds of wrong. But one did what one must to survive; he understood that better than most.

For now, he ignored the radio, leaned down, and enjoyed the chase. The scout flew well, staying ahead of them in the tunnel—but none of them were flying at full speed. These turns were too tight.

And unfortunately the scout didn't need to escape. He just had to get close enough to home to draw attention. So Nomad might have to do something foolish.

"Take the next exit through the broken ceiling, Rebeke," he said over the radio. "I'm going to punch this up a little."

"*What?*"

Nomad slammed the accelerator beneath his left foot, zipping forward. He couldn't directly attack this fellow, even if he did get close. His best bet was to get right on his tail and push the man to be reckless.

The lava tube spat them out into a canyon a moment later. Nomad wove through it, noting how the rock walls were pocked with holes caused by escaping gases as the magma cooled. He could imagine this whole place forming as rainwater poured through the lava flow—stone solidifying amid explosions of steam as hot and cold clashed.

The scout glanced over his shoulder, showing a face with a long mustache. Then he accelerated in a sudden burst—frantically banking around a tight curve. Nomad followed, closing in, trying to get close enough to breathe down the man's neck. Indeed, as the two of them burst into the next section of canyon, the scout glanced over his shoulder again—and was startled to see how close Nomad had gotten. He sped up, even though this portion was narrower, and full of jagged lava stone occlusions.

Engines aflame, twin roars echoing down the canyon, they slipped in and out of shadow as tall peaks alternately obscured and revealed the rings.

The knight wonders, with increasing uncertainty, if his faithful servant has any storming idea what he is doing. He does realize what he is doing, right? Getting into a high-speed chase with someone who lives on a planet full of expert pilots?

They might be expert pilots, but Nomad was an expert in being chased. While he doubted he was as good a pilot as his quarry, the scout's motions were becoming increasingly erratic. He took turns too sharply, speeding up into curves instead of straightaways. Constantly checking over his shoulder.

Such a familiar feeling. So many times, the Night Brigade had nearly gotten him. Right at his back, their sights on him. Nomad knew that sense of panic, that scrambling burst of adrenaline. The dangers ahead of you suddenly trivial compared to the one behind you. You fixated on it, taking greater and greater risks.

It was the story of his life.

The scout knew the sun's pursuit. It too gave chase—but in a slow, inevitable, overbearing way. Not quick or *immediate*. Not like this. Nomad whizzed a little too close to a rock formation, felt it whoosh next to his head. At these speeds, a small miscalculation would cause a big explosion.

Unfortunately, just when Nomad was sure he was about to win, they burst out into an open section of the canyonlands. Surrounded by mesas and

peaks, this flatter region was essentially the floor of a large crater. That let the scout maximize his speed. Their cycles were matched in that regard, so Nomad stayed in close pursuit—but there was little he could do if he caught up. He needed to—

Lava erupted from the ground nearby. A geyser of brilliant orange-red heat sprayed flakes of fire, ash, and soot. Sparks washed over the front of Nomad's cycle and kept burning, even when the wind should have extinguished them.

Damnation, the knight exclaims. Voice full of emotion. The surprised kind.

The scout probably should have taken them higher to avoid the eruptions. But he wasn't thinking clearly, it seemed. Instead he turned, trying to swing out closer to the steep crater walls—perhaps thinking the ground might be more stable there.

Another section of stone exploded, hurling chunks of melting rock into the air. They fell around the cycles, shattering on the ground and bursting like fireworks. Muttering a few curses, Nomad broke off from direct pursuit as an entire wall of fire erupted from the ground just ahead—a wave of crimson stone that sloshed back down, parts of it immediately blackening and slumping like wax. Other parts kept glowing, like the heat of life itself.

He swerved around the obstacle, barely spotting another eruption from the buckling ground in time to dodge it. Reluctantly he pulled upward—out of the dangerous region, high into the sky. There, he resumed his pursuit, but the scout was far ahead. Too far. He'd almost reached the far side of the crater. Where—

A shot of light from above blasted the man off his cycle. The body dropped, sending the machine itself tumbling across the earth in a dusty, end-over-end collapse.

Nomad looked up to see Rebeke on her cycle a short distance ahead of him, rifle to her shoulder. Right. He *had* told her to get ahead, hadn't he?

He pulled up next to her, breathing deeply, heart racing. What had caused those geysers of magma? They were basically as far from the sunlight as one could get. This should be the *most* tectonically stable region of the planet, though maybe none of it was all that stable. Extreme convection or tidal forces might cause all kinds of issues with the crust breaking and—

Nope. Stop.

None of that.

He wiped his brow as another molten geyser erupted below. "Your planet," he said to her, "is rather emotional, isn't it? Never met one that I

could rightly say has tantrums."

She barely seemed to be paying attention. She stared down at the fallen scout.

"Rebeke?" Nomad asked.

"I…" She looked at him. "I shot him."

"Storms. Was that your first time?"

She nodded. "I've shot before. At people. Never hit, though." She shivered visibly. "I'm a hunter. All of us who can shoot are hunters; it's how we get meat. But to shoot at people…I mean, the Cinder King's people do it, but that's always seemed so…awful."

And you're right again, the knight tells him. About the hunters. How do you do it?

A lifetime of paying attention.

"I don't feel different," Rebeke said, "but I feel like I *should*. Does that make sense?"

Nomad shrugged. "My first time was with a spear. I had to keep fighting, didn't even get time to pause as his blood ran down onto my fingers." He shook his head. "That night, at stew, it just felt like a surreal day of training. I barely remembered the moment itself."

She nodded.

She seems comforted, the knight notes, even though the squire didn't say anything actually helpful.

"Knowing you aren't strange," he explained in Alethi, "*is* helpful. Knowing others felt like you did. Sometimes it's the only thing that *is* helpful."

"Why do you do that?" Rebeke asked. "Talk gibberish sometimes?"

"It's my own language," he said. "In other places, Rebeke, people speak all kinds of words you wouldn't recognize."

"But why speak it now? When nobody can understand?"

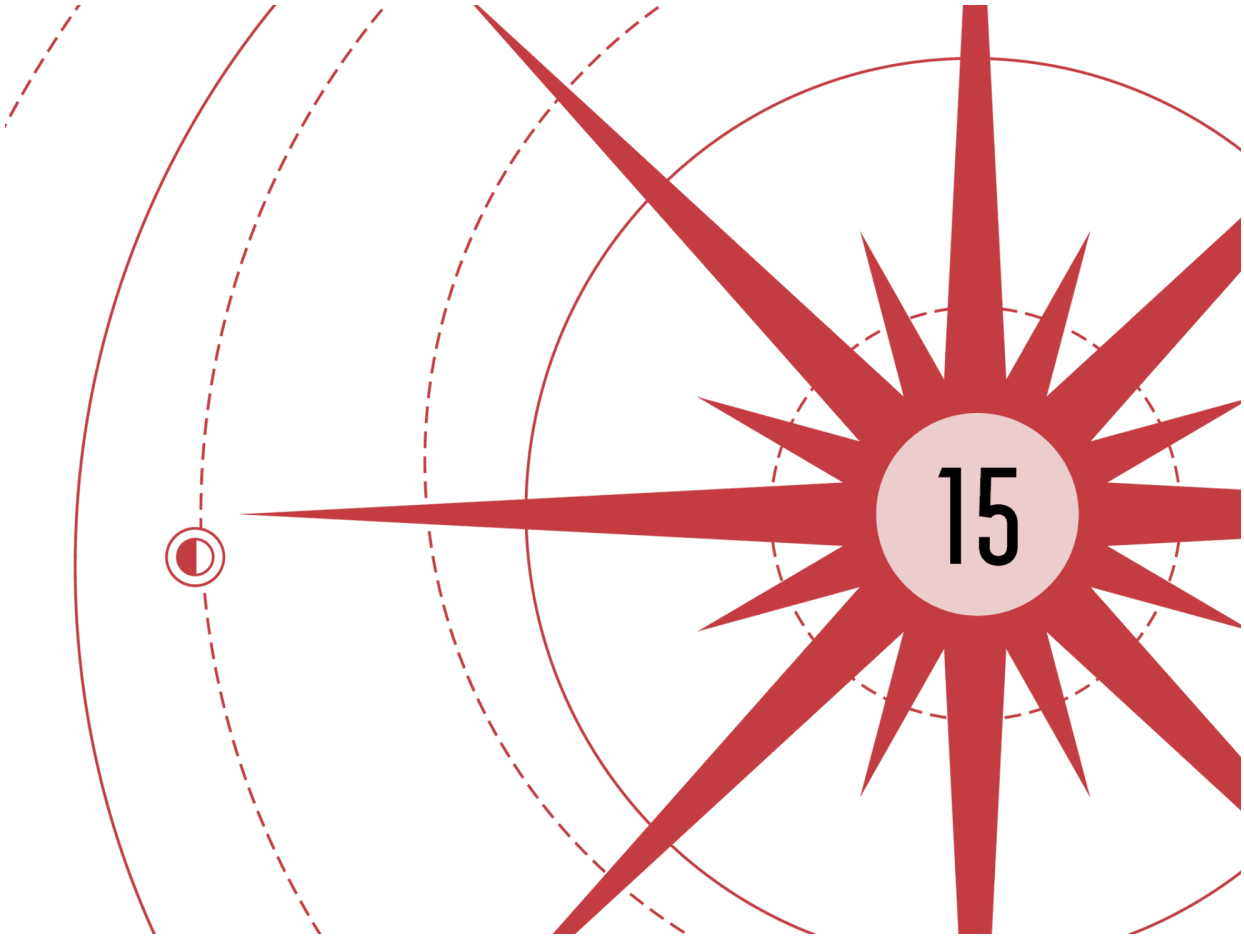
"I'm offering prayers," he said, picking a lie he thought might appeal to her, "to one of the ancient gods of my realm."

Please, no, the knight says. I'm no god. I work for a living.

Nomad checked to make certain his cycle had some flight time left, then nodded down toward the crash. "Come on. Let's go check on him."

"Why?" Rebeke said. "He's dead."

"Lesson number one about being a killer, Rebeke," he said. "Always make sure."



REBEKE POINTEDLY DIDN'T look at the corpse. Nomad considered forcing her to confront it. No use in her trying to pretend she hadn't shot the fellow. If she really wanted to protect her people, this wouldn't be the last man she'd have to kill.

He didn't bother. It wasn't his job to train her. Instead he did a cursory inspection of the corpse—and when he found a treasured picture, obviously drawn by a child, tucked into a pocket, he slipped it back into place without mentioning it to Rebeke.

She was kneeling beside the wreckage of the scout's cycle. "We'll salvage this," she said, then walked to her own cycle, lifted the seat, and pulled out a tow cable stored inside. "Even if it's beyond repair, salvaging this is easier than harvesting metal from the iron fields."

"Iron fields?" Nomad asked, crouching down.

"Places where molten metal coats the surface each rotation," she said, walking back. "One corridor north. We sneak in during the darkness and pry

up some of it before the Cinder King's forces arrive."

"And you use this how?" he asked, frowning. "Do you have full fabrication plants on your ships?"

"Fabrication plants?" she asked, cocking her head. "We use the Chorus, obviously. The spirits, like the one that follows you, create the objects we need."

Ahhh, the knight intones. That sounds interesting.

"Stop trying to bait me," he muttered in Alethi, then switched to her language. "Send someone else to salvage this, Rebeke. What is that blinking light there on the dash of the cycle?"

She cursed softly, lowering her towline. She knelt again, tapping a small, green-on-black indicator screen that was cracked but still flickering.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That shows an incoming radio signal," she said. "The speaker is busted, so we can't hear what they're saying. But…"

"But someone was calling this fellow when he went down," Nomad said. "Which means we got out of range of your signal blockers before he died. Damnation. He probably radioed in the moment he had a chance."

"It's what I'd have done," Rebeke said.

"This means they know he's down and that something, or *someone*, killed him."

"What if they send more troops? What if they send Charred? What if they bring the *entire city*?"

Nomad stood up, dusting off his hands. "Surely you know the answer to that by now." He started off toward his cycle. In front of him, the brilliant display of erupting earth had subsided, leaving the field pocked with holes and mounds of black lava rock.

"Nomad!" she called from behind. "I don't want this. To be a killer. To be like…like you."

He looked back, and a glib response came to his tongue.

Nomad, she's hurting, Auxiliary reminded him. *Please.*

He hesitated, seeing Rebeke holding to the towline she'd fetched, looking anywhere but at the corpse. Eyes downcast. He'd noticed, of course. It would be a bright day in the Weeping before Auxiliary read a human's emotions better than he did. Empathy, though…well, he should feel ashamed that a creature that was both dead *and* inhuman did a better job of that.

"I know," he said to Rebeke, letting his other response go. "Keep that in mind. It might help."

She nodded. He gave her a moment, walking over to his hovercycle to radio back to Contemplation. Perhaps he was supposed to call all three of the Greater Good at once, but their rules were irrelevant to him, and he liked Contemplation. She saw through him.

"Hey," he said. "We got the scout, but it seems likely he radioed home first. You might have company on the way. How's the hunt going?"

"Terribly," Contemplation said. "There doesn't seem to be anything here, though we're in the right place."

"How can you tell?" he asked, curious.

"Celestial navigation," she said. "We can tell from the rings and the stars. Those are the glowing things—"

"I know what stars are, thank you," he said.

"Just checking. Well, they can tell us with reasonable accuracy where we are on the planet. The corridor we're in is easy to determine. Harder to tell the longitude, however. You need—"

"Precise clocks," he said. "Yes. I'm aware of that too."

"Strange, how much you know about the surface world for one who lived his life underneath it."

"Keep asking yourself questions like that, Contemplation," he said, "and maybe you'll eventually realize the erroneous assumptions you've made about me. Either way, we don't have a lot of time left."

"We're repeating our search," she said. "The opening might be buried deeply this time, which would make our readings difficult. Still, we *should* have found it. This is the longitude where the Cinder King stopped each time to test his key. Several of our people have seen the opening, Nomad. It's real. Yet our prospectors can't find it."

"Well, what do you want us to do?"

"You're taking orders from me now?" Contemplation asked.

"Depends on how stupid they are."

She grunted. "If it pleases you, accept this direction—stay there a little while and see if you can spot anyone coming to check on the scout. Perchance they'll just send a small group in to investigate."

"If this is the region where the door is," Nomad said, "then the Cinder King might have guessed what we're doing. He might realize you've swapped the keys."

"If we've been subjected to such ill luck, expect an entire military force. You will, at your pleasure, please warn us if that's the case."

A good enough suggestion. "We'll do it."

“I am pleased you find my direction agreeable. Did the scout have a sunheart in his vehicle?”

Nomad glanced toward Rebeke, who was already checking on that herself. At his called question, she looked back at him and shook her head.

“Looks like it was running on a battery,” he said to Contemplation.

“Shades,” she muttered. “We could have used that.”

“Your ships are running out of power?”

“We decided not to make new sunhearts,” she explained, “though we are low on power. The decision was made instead to try Elegy’s plan of getting into the Refuge. Our failures so far have left us strained for resources. They come at a terrible cost, requiring—”

“I know.”

“I was to go next,” she said, “as were my sisters in the Greater Good. Three others were to take our place. I feel…a burden of guilt, not having gone as was my time. Yet our people need leadership right now. Unfortunately, if we don’t find the entrance…we now won’t have enough power to last another rotation.”

Damnation. “Then you’d *better* find that entrance,” he said, nodding to Rebeke as she put away the towline and climbed onto her cycle.

They left the wreckage and took off, then immediately hid behind a natural merlon at the lip of the crater. Far to Nomad’s left, the sky was growing light with a predawn glow. Faintly so—this wasn’t yet even what he’d have called twilight on another planet. But sunrise wasn’t deadly on other planets, and twilight had never felt quite so ominous to him as it did here.

They powered down the cycles to conserve their batteries and kept watch—ignoring that looming light to the left. The rocks here were dark and glasslike. Obsidian, maybe. It reminded him of another place, another world he’d once traveled. A place where he’d met Auxiliary.

Rebeke dug out bread and sausage, slicing them and making a sandwich, using a spread that looked like oil with herbs. No butter, which he supposed made sense. He didn’t know what they hunted for meat, but those flying ships didn’t have room for cultivated livestock.

“Contemplation is wrong about you, isn’t she?” Rebeke asked, offering him some of the food, which he took. “She thinks you’re from some strange underground place, but I think you’re from somewhere more normal.”

“And where would that be?” he asked.

She nodded her chin up, toward the stars.

“Another world is more normal?”

“We came from another world,” she said around bites of her food. Odd, how they even ate with gloves on. “Chased by an ancient force known as the Evil.”

“It’s still there,” he said. “On your homeworld. I’ve seen it. Well, the manifestations of it.” Wild, unchained Investiture, come to life with its own alien will—forming mountain-sized figures with impossible, unnerving features and unknowable motivations. Threnody was not a place one visited to relax.

This comment finally threw her for a loop. She almost dropped her sandwich as he said it.

“Strangely, the Chorus—who hold our history—don’t speak of our leaving because of the Evil,” she continued. “No, they say it was the quarreling. The infighting that sprang up among our people. Conflict, hatred. My ancestors wanted to escape that, for it was more pernicious than the Evil itself. *Strife* destroyed our people.

“During our flight from the Evil, there was more bickering among the people. My group…we listened to the preaching of a man: the servant of Adonalsium and the original Lodestar. We left with him to a new land. We chose this.”

Nomad grunted, trying his own sandwich, which proved to be terribly bland. What he wouldn’t give for at least some chili powder. Half the planets he visited had diets with all the flavor of a cup of water. Storms, back home, even the *bread* was spicier than this sausage.

Still, it was food, and he forced it down. Investiture could sustain him, but at barely ten percent Skip capacity, he would rather not waste it on mere metabolism.

“We were supposed to be free here,” Rebeke said, still watching the horizon. “From each other. I often wonder if the first Lodestar brought us here specifically to keep us running, to give us something to focus upon. A sun that destroys, like the Evil itself, always pursuing us. Until now, it has prevented us from turning on each other.”

“You’ve gone all this time without violence?”

“We had violence,” she said. “Crimes of passion. Arguments. But no actual killers. No *trained* ones. That was the Cinder King’s innovation.”

Remarkable, the knight says. I can’t decide if they’re naive or impressive.

“It’s not human nature to kill, Aux,” he whispered in Alethi. “You must be trained to do it. If you want to be effective, at least.”

From what he'd heard, there were as many as fifty groups on this planet, all running parallel to one another in these "corridors." Enough of a population to foster interchange and prevent inbreeding, but it was also a situation begging for a tyrant's hand. Scarce resources. Many small populations unaccustomed to working together.

In that light, it *was* remarkable that it had taken so long for a Cinder King to arise. Nomad wasn't an ethnographer. As much as his master had pushed him, Nomad's interest had always been in engineering, the nature of Investiture, and the mechanisms one could create by manipulating it. Still, he had training from Wit about the nature of stories and the people who told them. So he recognized that these peoples' stories were bound to be fascinating. Enough so that part of him wished he could stay and learn them.

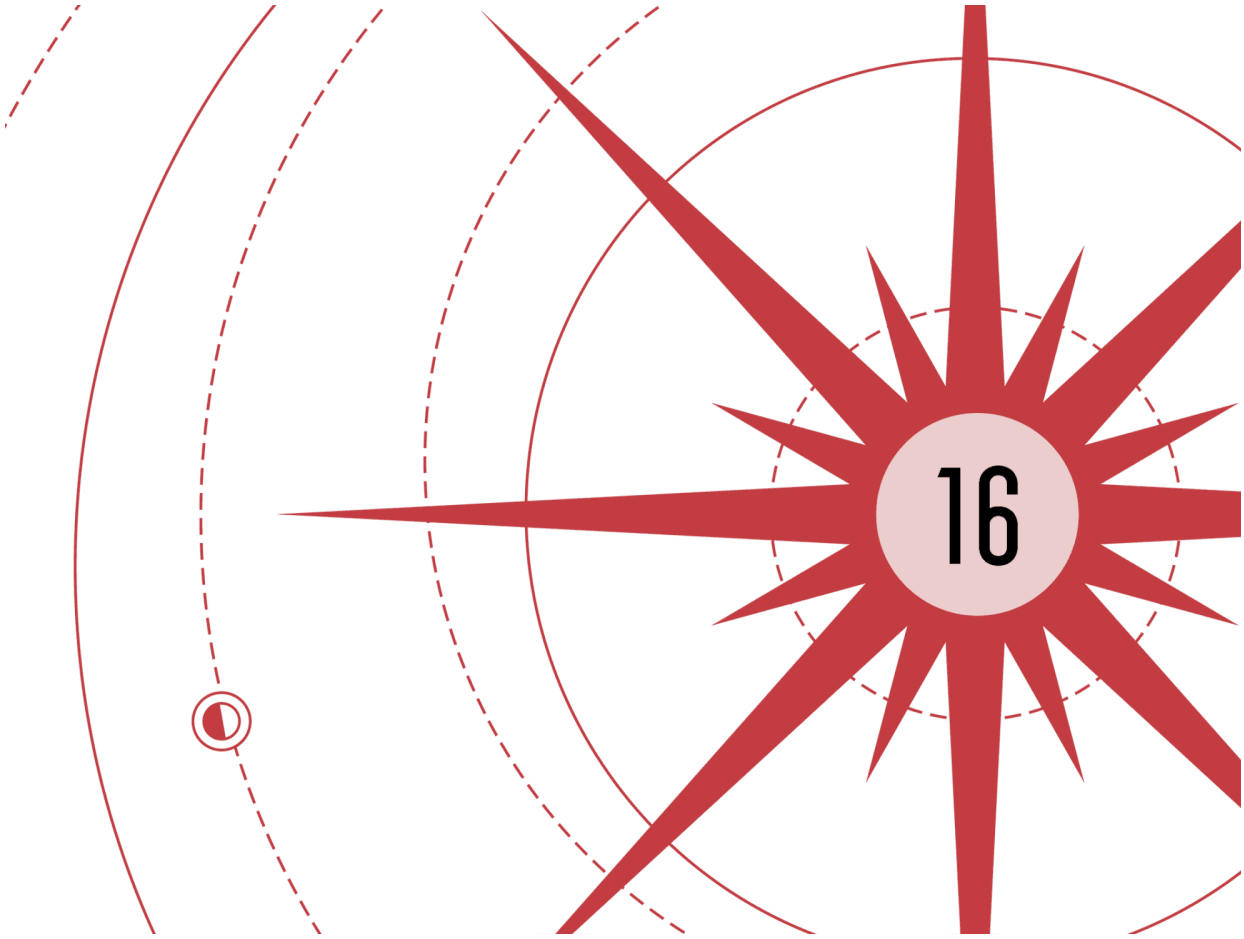
But the pursuit, the chase, ever loomed. It drove away all other thoughts, like a predator ravaging a once-placid flock.

He couldn't linger.

He *had* to get away.

So he watched keenly, instead of asking for more information. And well that he did, for he soon spotted a ship coming to check on the fallen scout. A single vessel, larger than most—perhaps the size of a small bus. Its ornamented sides glowed golden in the ringlight.

Rebeke gasped as he pointed it out. "That's the Cinder King's *own ship*!"



THE CINDER KING'S own ship?

By *itself*?

Damnation. What was going on?

"Why would he come on his own?" Rebeke asked, her confusion mirroring Nomad's own. "It makes no sense."

His frown deepened as he saw the man himself stroll out onto the deck, hands behind his back, eyes burning in the twilight. The ship parked in the sky, hovering, with the Cinder King standing at the bow. It was an invitation if Nomad had ever seen one.

"He's here for me," Nomad said.

"What? How would he even know you're here?"

"Depends on how much that scout was able to report," Nomad said.

Nomad, the knight says trepidatiously, what are you thinking?

"Trepidatiously? Is that even a word?"

Not a proper one. Oh, you're going to do something stupid, aren't you?

“I can’t stop moving,” he said. “If I stop, I die.” He switched to the local tongue. “Rebeke, I’m going to go up. Pretend that you’re not here. But if things go poorly, try to back me up.”

“Uh…” the young woman said. “How will I know if things go poorly?”

“I’ll most likely come crashing through one of those windows,” he said. “If I’m lucky, I’ll do so of my own choice.” He took a deep breath, pulled his cycle out of the overhang, restarted the engine, and went roaring into the sky.

The Cinder King’s luxury ship was hovering at the peak of what the cycle could manage, height-wise. Nomad’s vehicle strained as it hovered up to the bow, and again he noticed that his ears popped from pressure change rather quickly as he climbed to that height.

The Cinder King wore a high-collar shirt under a long coat marked with softly glowing ribbons of light, highly polished boots, and black leather gloves. He smiled, the light in his eyes mirrored by the ember in his chest.

He turned and gestured toward a docking point at the side of the deck. This ship was shaped like a seafaring boat, with narrow decks that widened near the bow, a control cabin, and storage space within the hull. Nomad hadn't seen much wood since coming here, and this thing was emblazoned with it—and with gold trim that must glitter fiercely in brighter conditions. The docking point was a rectangle cut out of the deck, where a small craft could slot in.

Nomad carefully moved into position—but didn't fully dock. He left the cycle hovering on its own power and stepped out onto the deck. From the cabin, two Charred—their simmering embers impossible to miss in the shadows—moved closer. Their king, however, waved them back. With his other hand, he reached welcomingly to Nomad.

Last time, the knight notes, he locked us up and tried to brand us. Why the change in behavior?

The Cinder King waved over a white-jacketed servant, who carried a stack of…large pieces of paper? Yes, stiff paper—almost cardboard—with pictures on them and…

"Oh," Nomad said in their tongue as the man held up the first, depicting the Cinder King and Nomad shaking hands. "Yeah, you won't need those. I figured out your language."

"You…figured it out?" the Cinder King said. Storms, those eyes were unnerving. Reminded Nomad of people he had once trusted, once loved. "In less than a day?"

"I'm a quick learner," Nomad said. "How did you know I would be here?"

"Please," the Cinder King said, smirking. "Someone brought down one of my best scouts? It was obvious. Would you kindly join me inside? No tricks, I promise."

"An oath?" Nomad said, curious. "Given so easily? Tell me what this is about, and I will consider it."

"Our initial meeting was unfortunate."

To put it mildly, the hero remarks.

"But," the Cinder King continued, "I've realized the mistake was mine. Having you be one of my Charred would have been delightful, but there is another way to have you serve me. I'd like to hire you."

"Hire me," Nomad said flatly.

“Yes,” the Cinder King said, walking briskly toward the cabin. “They do that on your planet, don’t they? That place you come from, of storms and stone? They hire men as soldiers?”

He knew?

How did he *know*?

For the first time, Nomad was legitimately intrigued by this man. He found himself following the Cinder King into the cabin. Behind a door at the front were the pilot’s controls. A small bank of screens sat atop a desk, each showing a flickering scene of the Cinder King’s ship from a different angle. Nomad had almost forgotten about the security camera he’d seen while restrained in the arena, but here was evidence of the Cinder King’s tight control over his people. One of the swiveling images faced the ground beneath the ship, zoomed in so far that Nomad could see the wreckage of the scout’s cycle. He hoped they couldn’t spot Rebeke from here. He forced himself to turn away before someone noticed where he was looking.

The majority of the space was a room with fine woods, a bar, and several plush seats. The Cinder King shooed back several Charred who haunted the room. He walked over and served himself a drink.

“Would you like some?” he asked, holding up a cup. He sipped it to prove it wasn’t poisoned, though Nomad’s body was Invested enough to handle any normal poison.

He took the drink, had a smile about the codes he used to follow, then downed it in a single shot. It was good stuff. He wouldn’t have expected that from a planet full of religious types, but then again, the best moonshine on his own planet was made by a deeply religious people. So what did he know?

“The first offworlder I killed,” the Cinder King said, sipping his own drink, “was weak. Plump, with strange long eyebrows. Tried to talk his way free through the use of some device that made his words work in our language. I didn’t know what he was. Seemed better to end him, as I thought he might be some kind of demon.

“It was in his things that I found the books.” He slipped one out of a bookcase next to the bar and held it up.

It was one of those Silverlight guidebooks, an antiquated volume—the type originally written through much travail by people visiting the various planets on difficult expeditions. That had grown easier with the advent of space travel, and Nomad felt something had been lost with the ease by which people now went from world to world.

This old volume was a survey book, which spoke of many different planets. A little on each one. Curious. It was written in Thaylen, which—with the eyebrows of the man who'd been carrying it—indicated the former owner had been from Nomad's own homeworld.

"The translation device," the Cinder King explained, "allowed me to read this book. The translator gave out eventually, but I'd been wise enough to commission written translations by then. The book speaks of all kinds of peoples from all kinds of places in the stars. I think this section is about you, though, isn't it? Rosharan. A tall people with distinctive features, like here in this illustration. Warlike, extremely aggressive, dangerous."

"A generalization," Nomad said.

"In your case, though?"

"True enough," Nomad said. "I'm surprised you invited me in. Close quarters favor me with my greater reach."

That made the man's grin grow even wider. "You *are* a killer. Tell me, you have them on your world, then? Kings, warlords, *emperors*?"

"Too many," Nomad said. "So?"

The Cinder King closed the book and rested his fingers on it. "I always felt that there was more for me to do. A greater destiny. Surely *I* wasn't meant to just live life in an endless rotation on the run from the light. I was *important*. In these books, I learned what I was to do, offworlder." He looked to Nomad, eyes glowing brightly. "I was destined to unite all of my people."

Well, Nomad had heard that somewhere before. He smiled, then he laughed. Partially because he knew the Cinder King would *hate* that sound. But mostly because, even here, it chased Nomad. In his early life, he'd passed through royal hands, traded from tyrant to tyrant like coins in the pocket. Until slavery had brought him low, and camaraderie finally led him to soar through the skies.

But storms. Even here, how many worlds away, it chased him. A pursuit of a completely different kind from the Night Brigade's.

The Cinder King's expression darkened.

"Sorry," Nomad said. "Just appreciating the irony of the situation. Please. Continue your megalomaniacal ranting."

The king walked over to one of his cabinets, from which he removed a very small sunheart. Barely glowing. "You know what this is?" he asked. "It's all that remains of your kinsman, the one who visited our planet, the one I slew. Your people make for terrible sunhearts, offworlder."

“I’m surprised you got anything,” he said. “The man you killed probably had Breath. And he was no kinsman of mine. From an entirely different country.”

“Your planet shouldn’t have different countries. You should have conquered and unified it all.”

“Conquest doesn’t remove countries,” Nomad said. “It removes lines on a map. Unity requires something else.”

The Cinder King growled softly, palming the tiny sunheart. “I thought, from what I read, you’d appreciate what I’m building here. I thought you might be inspired to find a taste of home.”

“Wrong taste,” Nomad said. “Try some curry powder next time. It has a much better flavor than tyranny. Less nutty.”

The Cinder King finished his drink, then returned the sunheart to its place. He rounded the room, passing behind one of the Charred—whom he seized by the throat. He squeezed, and the poor man didn’t fight back, barely even struggled.

“I am the most powerful man on Canticle, offworlder,” he said, still squeezing. “You see how they can’t *protest or resist*? How they serve me regardless of how I treat them? I have *absolute* power over these.” He smiled. “Once, before I rose to my destiny, I was the man who marched prisoners to their fates. There, I realized that true power is not in the ability to kill, but in the ability to control the killers.”

Well, that’s a perfectly normal and reasonable way of thinking, the knight observes sarcastically. I’m sure he’s absolutely the most well-adjusted man on the planet, eh?

Nomad said nothing. He wished that this sort of sentiment was rarer. He’d seen it in guards, in watchmen, in soldiers. He saw it in the eyes of anyone who got a *thrill* from having others in their power. The stronger the person they could push around, the more intoxicating they found it.

This man might not be brilliant or clever, though he’d think himself both. Truth was, he didn’t need either to be dangerous. Because he had power, and power—wielded by a fool—could crush anyone, smart or not. These types always gravitated toward positions of authority. During the time he’d been in command, Nomad had been forced to learn to spot them. If you didn’t, then…well, this happened. They grew, like a nest of rats.

The worst kind of bully. Many were deeply afraid, which was why they lashed out. Those you could eventually help. This kind of man, though…

Well, it was refreshing. He'd faced far, *far* too many enemies with pictures from their kids in their pockets. Killed far too many people who never deserved it. But here was a man Nomad could run through with a hot poker and only feel bad for the poker.

"What is it you want, offworlder?" the Cinder King asked, finally letting go of his Charred, who fell to his knees, gasping. Nice to know they could be strangled. That didn't work on all Invested beings.

"I'm a simple man," Nomad said, helping himself—without asking—to more of the liquor. "I run. I just want to stay ahead of the people hunting me."

The Cinder King turned to the front of the cabin, where the open doorway to the pilot's station let them see the windshield—and beyond that, the horizon, where light was growing ever brighter.

"Understandable," the Cinder King said. "I can protect you from those chasing you."

This time, Nomad almost choked on his drink as he belted out a laugh. "Yeah, all right, sure. Good luck."

"Stop laughing at me."

"Oh, don't worry," Nomad said, waving his fingers and finishing the drink. "I'm allowed to laugh at kings. I've got a card somewhere from my master, granting me authorization." He shook his head. *Damnation*, that was good liquor. He *almost* felt something from it—a very, very light buzz—and it took a lot to get through his body's protections.

An official entered and whispered something to the Cinder King, and some of his good humor returned. A moment later, two more entered from the deck, dragging Rebeke. Her hair loose from its braid, her mouth gagged, her eyes wild as she struggled.

Nomad snapped the shot glass down on the counter.

The Cinder King, misinterpreting the motion, smiled more deeply. He slipped a handgun from a holster at his hip and pointed it at the young woman.

Oh, the knight says, up until this moment I thought he might actually be smart.

"Compassion?" the Cinder King asked Nomad. "From one such as you? I expected more from a man of your world. After all my studies, I expected you to be ruthless."

Nomad sighed.

The official continued whispering to the Cinder King, and Nomad picked out the words “entire city” and “prospectors.” The Cinder King’s frown returned, and he thought for a moment—clearly aware of the area they were in. His eyes flickered to the safe on the wall where he likely kept his key, the one replaced with a fake in the chaos of the surprise attack.

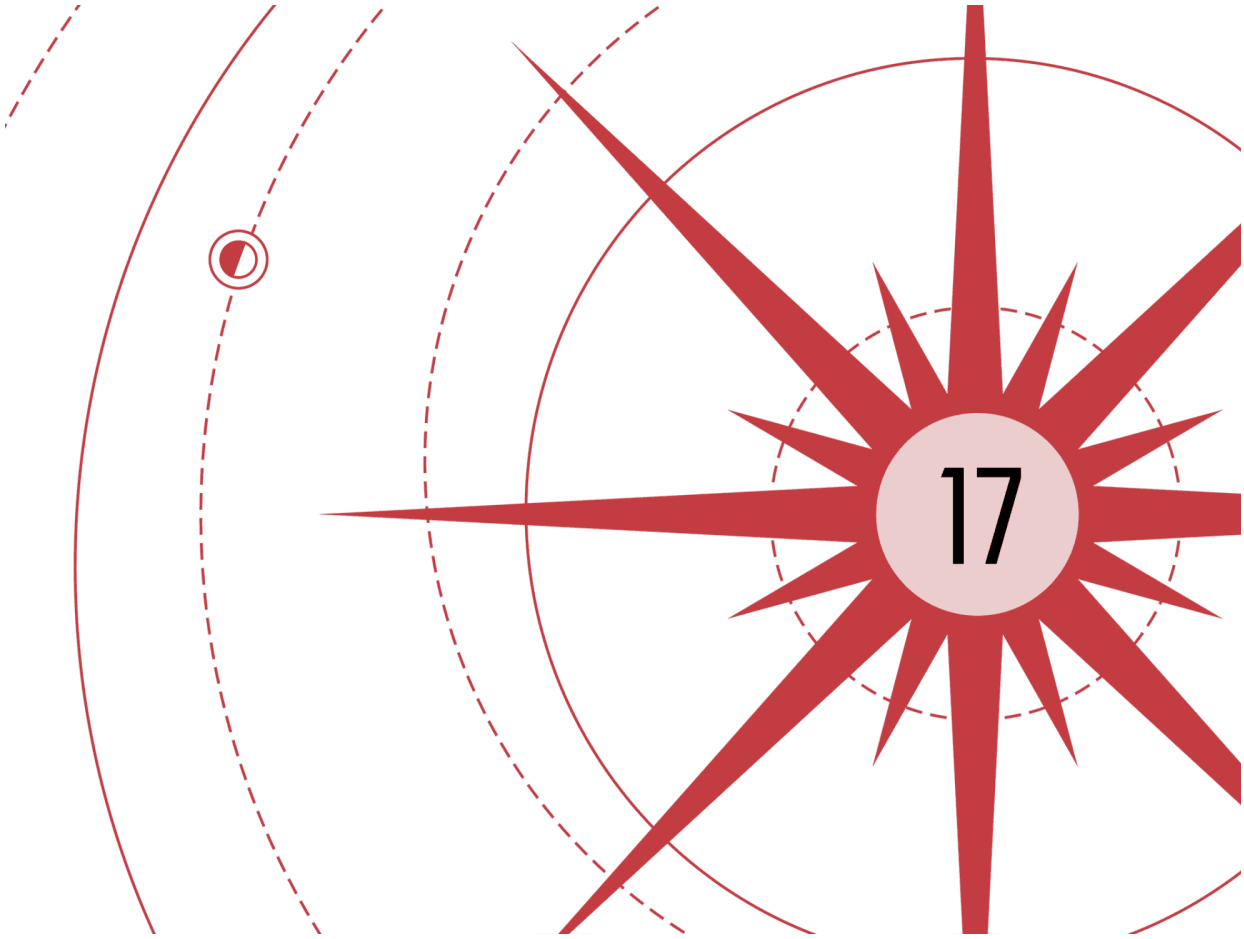
He was putting it together. Damnation.

“You should have kept reading,” Nomad said, pulling back the man’s attention. “It’s not compassion that drives me, Cinder Fool. It’s not ruthlessness either.” He took a pointed step forward—putting himself closer to the Cinder King, and toward the line of sight between the man and Rebeke. “I really do only want to get away. But there’s one thing you need to know about my people. You promised me *no tricks*. And you should *never* break an oath to a Rosharan.”

Nomad lunged to the side as the king focused again, his gun aimed at Rebeke. At the same time, Nomad formed Auxiliary into a metal ball in his hand.

The Cinder King fired.

And Nomad’s thrown sphere knocked the blast from the air in a shower of sparks.



NOMAD WASN'T TRULY faster than most projectiles.

He missed stunts like this one more often than not. It depended on how well he could position himself, and how soon he could ready a throw before the trigger was pulled. He'd once spent weeks training to deflect bullets and had only managed about one in ten.

Fortunately for Rebeke, today he was on point.

It made a compelling trick when he succeeded. Even more so here, with the blast exploding into a firework of light, throwing sparks.

"Idiot," Nomad said, summoning Auxiliary back into his hand as a simple metal sphere. "I was considering your offer—until you gave me a reason to look forward to killing you."

Those in the room gaped at him. Their moment of stunned disbelief gave him a chance to lunge and grab Rebeke. The two Charred immediately blocked the exits on either side, so he shoved her through the door into the pilot's station.

Before Nomad could follow, one Charred bodychecked him, slamming him against the wall with the Cinder King's treasure cabinet—including the tiny sunheart—causing the contents to rattle. Nomad turned and looked at this Charred; his face bore long red streaks, like someone had run burning pokers across his skin.

The Charred grinned and stepped back. Nomad reflexively raised his fists—then froze against his will. This let the enemy punch him three times in succession, dropping him with ease. Nomad slammed to the metal floor and groaned softly. But there wasn't time to stop and rest.

Never seemed like there was time for that. He pushed himself into a crouch and hurled himself to his feet, dodging past the Charred who tried to pile onto him. Nomad's quick steps brought him into the small control room with Rebeke.

He immediately slammed the door, then formed Auxiliary into a door guard. Clamps at the side fuzzed and locked onto the frame around the door as he pressed it into place. When the two Charred tried to shove the door open, they found themselves completely blockaded. Not that this wooden door would last long with armed people on the other side.

Rebeke backed into the cab's control panel. "Did you just *knock* a *bullet* from the *air*?" she asked.

Nomad grabbed the pilot's metal stool and threw it at the windshield, cracking it. Glass, contrary to a lot of his master's stories, was strong stuff. But the windshield rattled in its frame. Good enough.

"Nomad?" she asked as he threw the stool again, which bounced off this time, then they ducked as bullets began blasting through the door.

"Yes, I deflected a bullet," he said. "I can manage it about one in ten times. Get ready to run for my cycle."

"*One* in ten?" she said, growing paler.

"Fortunately you're the one. Pay attention!" Another shot came through the door. They assumed he'd somehow thrown the dead bolt and were trying to shoot the doorknob off.

Nomad jumped up onto the control panel and slammed his shoulder into the windshield, completely breaking it free of the frame. Together he fell with it outside, where he rolled to his feet and ran across the deck. Rebeke found her wits and scrambled out after him.

To his vast relief, he found the cycle where he'd left it. Yes, they'd docked it and chained it in place, but they didn't seem to have sabotaged it. Auxiliary, as a crowbar, let him pop the chain from where it had been

mounted to the deck. Rebeke climbed behind the controls and unlatched it from the side of the ship. Nomad leaped onto the seat behind her.

The Cinder King strode out of his cab, pistol in hand, firing wantonly—and Nomad blocked with a shield. A second later, Rebeke dove the cycle toward the ground, nearly tossing him off with the sudden acceleration. He managed to hang on with his knees and grip her around the waist with one arm, keeping his shield up and intercepting a few more shots as they descended.

"This is going to get awkward," he remarked in Alethi, "if they start shooting at the cycle and not me. Can you get a little bigger and protect the whole thing?"

You are at just over ten percent Skip capacity, the hero warns. I'll need some of that to grow. If we drop below ten percent, we won't be able to make new Connections, though you'll maintain the ones you made before.

"Do it," Nomad said, feeling Auxiliary grow weightier in his hand—feeding off the Investiture they'd gathered. He expanded to about five feet across, just in time to block more shots. That size increase wouldn't be permanent, and would continue to leech Investiture from Nomad while he remained that size.

Rebeke continued to dive, and he realized she was going for the other hovercycle. He could see the edge of it peeking out into the ringlight from the stone overhang below. Apparently the officers who had grabbed her had left it.

"Rebeke!" he shouted. "We need to get away!"

"These are one of the only sets of cycles we have!" she shouted back, turning her head so he could hear over the wind. "I'm not going to abandon one."

Nomad looked up. The Cinder King appeared at the edge of the deck above, his glowing eyes like the coals at the heart of a campfire. He held something else in his hand. The key?

The fake key. He slammed it and his pistol to the deck in obvious fury, then held out his hand to the side, where someone handed him a rifle. He took aim, and blast after blast hit the shield.

"Rebeke!" he yelled. "You might be low on cycles, but if you stop down there, he *is* going to pick us off from above. Do you understand?"

A moment passed, the cycle still screaming toward the ground. Then, with obvious frustration, she pulled up and shot them along the ground—leaving the other cycle behind, abandoned. The Cinder King took no further shots.

Indeed, Nomad thought he saw the man stalk back to his cabin, though the distance was now too great to be sure.

He has figured out, the knight conjectures, that the Beaconites replaced his key and are hunting for the doorway.

"You think?" Nomad grumbled in Alethi, dismissing the Investiture-draining shield, then called to Rebeke, "Trade me places."

"What?"

He forced her to slow, now that they were out of range, and let him take the driver's seat. There was barely enough room on the cycle for that, and as he got her on the back portion, she refused to hold him around the waist.

He frowned at her.

"We don't…touch," she said. "It's not comfortable for us."

"Even through clothing?" he demanded.

She looked away. "It just feels strange to—"

"Yeah, whatever. I don't care." He locked her in place by the legs with an improvised variation of Auxiliary's door blocker. Then he tore off toward the main body of Beaconites and fired up the radio. "Contemplation," he said, "we have a problem."

"Alas, my news is of a similar nature," she replied. "We've gone over the region twice and found nothing."

"He's been lying to you," he said, "about the location of the doorway. Obscuring it by making a big show of stopping in this region."

"As I explained previously, some of us have seen it."

"And how precise is their memory of the exact location? Did they memorize the positions of the stars? There are no persistent landmarks on this world. So—"

"So," she admitted, "those who saw the door could have been in a different location entirely. And it is reasonable, I admit that the coordinates we're relying upon could be a lie meant to confuse people, in case this very situation arose."

"Exactly," he said, leaning low against the wind. "I just had a chat with him. He's a tyrant, but fortunately for us, he's a stupid tyrant—with more ego than brains."

"Pardon, but you *chatted* with him?"

"Yeah. Long story."

It's really not, the knight observes. He stopped by. You flew up.

"That's not the long part of it," he said in Alethi. "The long part would be explaining why I flew up there." He continued in the local tongue.

“Contemplation, he knows. He’s figured out you swapped the keys.”

“Not to offend unduly, Sunlit—but did you tip him off to it by accident?”

“Think that if it makes you feel better,” he said, “but he didn’t need any help from me. I watched him piece it together—all he needed was the information that Beacon was searching this area and that you’d brought everyone from your city. He isn’t as smart as I first thought him, but even he could put two and two together.”

Contemplation was quiet over the line.

“Look,” Nomad said. “He’s gathering his forces and will be upon you soon. It’s time to pull out and retreat to the darkness.”

“If we retreat,” Contemplation said, “we will be dead before we can rotate to this position again.”

“If you don’t retreat, you’ll be dead a lot sooner. Doesn’t seem like a difficult decision to me.”

She sighed. “I’m just…so tired of running.”

“Lady,” he replied, “you have *no idea* how well I understand that.”

“I shall speak to the rest of the Greater Good,” she said, “and we shall decide. You have young Rebeke with you still, I hope.”

“I’ve got her,” he said. “She’s a tad stormy because I made her leave a cycle behind, but she’s in one piece—and has no extra holes in her.”

“It is well,” Contemplation said. “She may not be our Lodestar, but she is a symbol to this people now that her siblings are gone. I offer this request: endeavor not to get her killed. At least, not before the rest of us fall.”

She cut off, and Nomad was left to worry that they wouldn’t heed his warning. Fortunately, by the time he got back to the main body, they were organizing as he’d wished and moving back toward the darkness—which had moved pretty far off by that point. The horizon was growing brighter. Probably still an hour or so from full daylight, but he dipped his cycle lower anyway, to be deeper in the planet’s shadow.

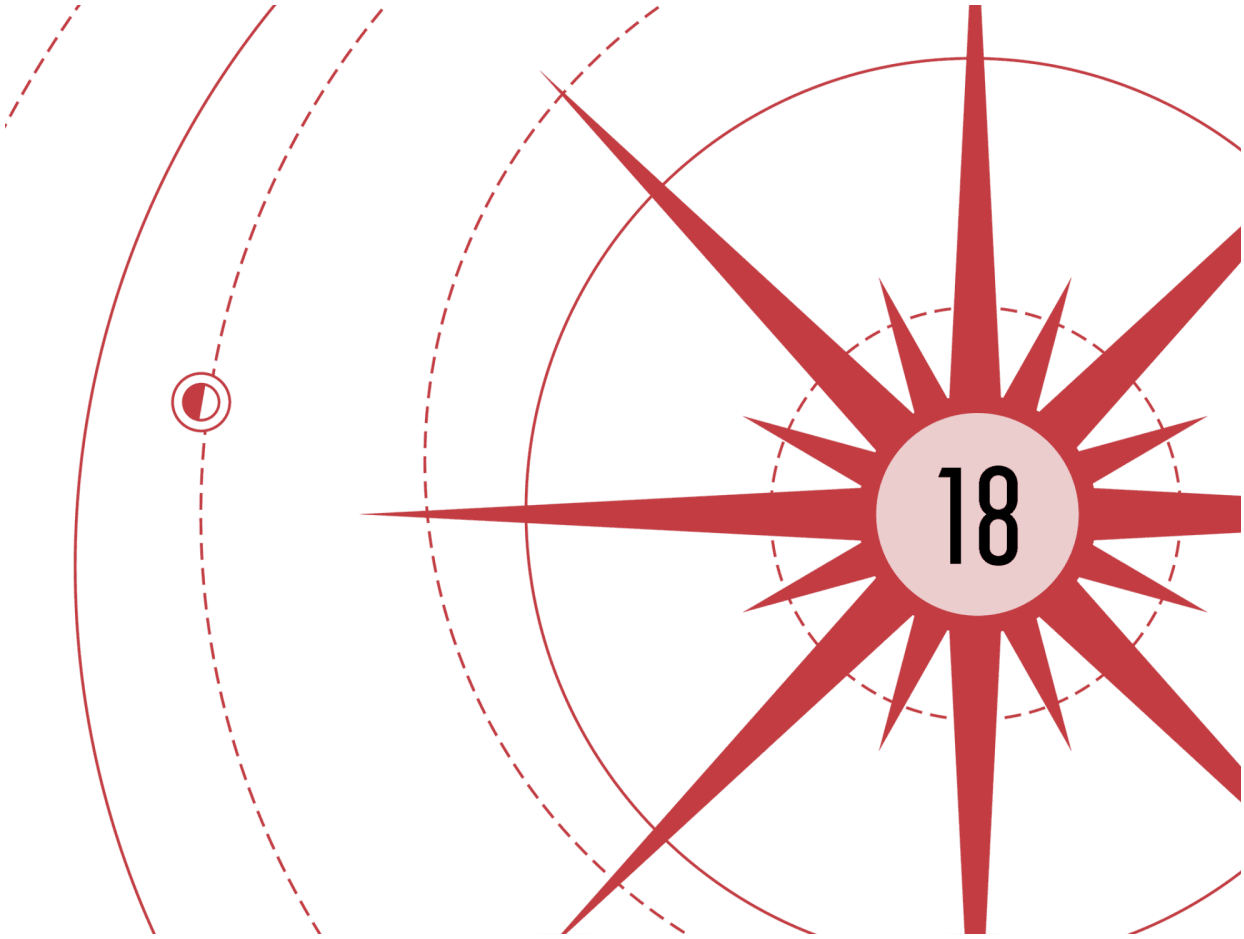
Down here, the plants were growing. Not as quickly as they’d been just on the edge of dawn, but the growth was perceptible. The landscape he’d left behind had been barren, full of mud and crags. This one was overgrown with life, moss on virtually every surface, grass waving in the winds, and it even bore small thickets of trees, their branches reaching toward the rings. It felt like an entirely different place; landmarks he’d noticed before leaving were now obscured by the foliage and deep greenery.

How did seeds survive the cataclysmic heat of the day? Storms. The plants on this world must be something extraordinary. And the animals? As

he zoomed past, he startled a group of gazelle-like creatures, who leaped up from feeding and bounded toward the darkness. Their eyes glowed faintly golden. Invested in some way.

He found the quadcycle's central fuselage where they'd left it, the other jets keeping it aloft. After locking the smaller one into place—and releasing Rebeke, who took over driving—they joined the rest of the ships, flying away from the sun in their ceaseless trek.

For a time, Nomad thought maybe they'd actually escaped. Then they reached the rim of the cloud cover, where even reflected sunlight didn't reach—and he saw something in the darkness beyond. A multitude of burning red lights. Seconds later, several dozen enemy ships zoomed out, on the attack.



"THEY WERE SEARCHING for us," Rebeke said. "While we were out here, they were in there, hunting for Beacon!"

She was right. The ships coming out of the darkness veered to the sides in surprise. They'd gotten orders to fly back to stop Beacon but hadn't expected to run into it so soon. For a few confusing minutes, chaos reigned. Both groups of ships broke up, swarming in all directions. Nomad's stomach tried to crawl up his esophagus as Rebeke dove toward the ground. The radio became a barking frenzy of questions and orders.

"To the east!" Contemplation's voice cut through it all. "Gather to the east. Make into the darkness and follow the Beacon!"

Rebeke veered that way, their engines burning a strip of ash through the plants beneath them, which whipped at Nomad's legs. He craned his neck, expecting to see weapon fire above. But there was practically none. Just a sharpshooter blast here and there.

He reminded himself that they didn't have guns mounted on their ships. Instead he saw a couple of enemy vessels bracket a blue-striped Beaconite ship and lock on either side, like they were docking. Soldiers leaped from the Cinder King's ships, rushing the Beaconite's cockpit.

Before he'd found his Torment, he'd lived on a world without firearms. Back there, they'd engaged in a more personal, brutal kind of combat—the kind where you were forced to watch the other fellow die as you found the most efficient way of separating his blood from his body.

This conflict felt more like naval warfare on his homeworld: no cannons, no artillery, just ramming and boarding. It was cumbersome, but it made sense here, since capturing a ship was among the most constructive things you could do, simultaneously shrinking the enemy force and enlarging your own. In addition, the Cinder King's military strength relied on the Charred, who were most effective in close-up combat.

Nomad, the knight says, look up, fifty degrees to your left.

He followed the directions to a ship bobbing in the air, beleaguered by a large enemy ship locked onto it—and that enemy ship was boosting away from the darkness at full thrust. Like many of the Beaconite ships, the captured one was more a flying house than a military vessel, and it couldn't counter the enemy ship's greater power. It was being towed away.

That's the one that we met the Greater Good in, the knight notes to the squire's confused lack of understanding.

"Damnation. You sure?"

Unfortunately.

"Don't suppose these people know to separate their command staff on different vessels, do they?"

Seems like the sort of thing you only learn from sad experience…

He sighed as Rebeke wove and dodged. The enemy ships ignored him; they were after larger prey, bearing more people.

Well?

"Thinking," Nomad said, "on whether or not it's too late to go back to the Cinder King and take him up on his offer."

I'm glaring at you right now.

"You don't have eyes."

Which is why I have to explain it.

Nomad sighed, then tapped Rebeke on the shoulder and pointed at the ship in question. She looked in time to see two Charred leaping onto it, their

open-fronted robes rippling as they soared. He lost what Rebeke said next to the wind, but her expression was horrified.

"Get me close!" Nomad shouted. "And be ready to pull me out in case I need it. Try not to get captured this time!"

She nodded, pulling up in another jarring maneuver. Unfortunately a fleeing Beaconite vessel roared across their vector. Many of them were doing a good job of avoiding capture—that *was* something they had experience with. Still, Rebeke had to bank sharply left and then right to get back on track toward the Greater Good's ship.

He noted another vessel coming up to their right—between him and the command ship.

"This is your fault, Aux," he muttered.

Rebeke belatedly saw she was on a collision course and veered to the side. He used the momentum to launch himself straight off the back of the cycle, hitting hard on the ship coming their direction.

He glimpsed confused people in the cockpit as he rolled across their deck, then barely got purchase and threw himself out over an expanse, almost missing the side of the Greater Good's ship as it was towed in the other direction. He heaved himself up onto its deck, which was maybe ten feet across.

The enemy ship was still docked on the other side, hijacking the command ship's own thrust, piloted by one of the white-coated officers. The woman saw him, eyes going wide. She frantically fumbled with her rifle.

Her ill preparation gave him a chance, so he dashed across the deck and tried to tackle her—but of course, his Torment decided *that* would be too easy. It froze his muscles, sending him tripping in an embarrassing mess on the deck.

"That is *storming* annoying," he muttered, barely getting Aux up as a shield in time to block the rifle shots.

Didn't you have an idea to deal with that?

"Yes, but it will take time to put together," he said, backing away from the rifle fire. He eventually got even with the command ship's front window—but that had been covered by a blast shield. As the officer stopped to reload, he formed Auxiliary as a crowbar and got the cover off in a single heave, sending the metal panel clanging to the deck. Then he threw himself shoulder first at the window behind it.

And bounced off.

"What is it with these people and their windows!" he said, this time throwing Auxiliary through first as a large barbell.

Don't know, the knight replies as he smashes through the window with ease. Must be you.

Nomad grunted as bullets blasted the wall beside him, then hurled himself through and came up in a roll to his feet, out of sight of the riflewoman. Inside here, though, the two Charred from earlier were terrorizing the three Greater Good, who had pulled back to the far side of the room behind an overturned table. He saw their wizened heads peeking out as he stood up dramatically before the broken window. And wished to Damnation itself that he had any idea what to do next.

At least now the Charred turned their focus on him. They came in together, armed with batons. Fortunately the Cinder King took people captive so he could use them to make sunhearts, which explained his preference for batons instead of swords.

Unfortunately there were two of them, and they were *fast*. They descended upon him in a flurry of blows and growls, forcing him to block with a shield in a series of quick exchanges. He couldn't even try to force them back without being frozen by his own stupid soul, so he went full defensive—never a good way to win a fight. He had to ignore when they overextended their attacks, and he couldn't punish their frenzied barrage, which otherwise would have left them open to counterstrikes.

Instead he took hits on the arm, then the side, then a *devilish* crack on the head that sent him stumbling into the corner, vision swimming.

The knight hopes that his beleaguered squire has a plan.

"I've got one," he muttered, blocking another set of blows, then barely shoving himself out of the corner to escape being pinned there. "I jump back out the window. Maybe the Beaconites don't *really* need the help of these old ladies."

Of course, the knight says. Leave them without leadership and without supplies. That will work out well, I'm sure.

The two Charred—fueled by their Investiture, thus needing no pause for breathers—backed him into the *other* corner, beating him with relentless attacks.

Nomad? Auxiliary's voice was the same monotone as always. He couldn't manage anything else. Yet Nomad thought he could sense his friend's concern by the lack of a quip. *This is going to require a lot of healing. I'm barely keeping your body moving…*

A moment later the door slammed open, and the enemy pilot—the woman with the white coat—came in to help the Charred, rifle held at the ready. Well. That would do.

Nomad took another mean hit to the shoulder as he forced his way out of the corner. That left him open, though, and one of the Charred rushed him from behind, slamming him into the pilot. It wasn't his fault, therefore, that the collision sent her tumbling—and the Torment liked it when he kicked her gun away. No need for that.

From there, he made certain to keep the attention of the Charred, giving them a challenging smile—but swaying on his feet, tempting them with his weakness. In return, they redoubled their efforts, pounding on him, getting around his shield—all too easy in a fight of two against one. They hit him with a series of blows that caused him to lower the shield and expose his face to—

One of the Charred's heads exploded.

The other froze, then spun as Contemplation—standing in front of the table—unloaded shot after shot into his chest. She strode forward, black-dyed hair tumbling around her stocky figure, firing until she dropped the second Charred in a mess of smoldering embers and burned flesh.

Nomad dropped to his knees, gasping for breath as Contemplation pointed her rifle at the pilot, who raised her hands in response.

"Glad you can shoot," Nomad muttered.

"Did my share of hunting as a youth," the old woman replied. "Haven't held a rifle in years. Why did you kick it to me instead of grabbing it yourself?"

"Personal challenge," he said, flopping back onto the ground, eyes squeezed closed at the cumulative pain of his wounds. "I hate hogging the glory. Maybe one of you could get out there and shut down the ship pulling us the wrong way?"

He lost track of the next part. He didn't fall completely unconscious, but he retreated into himself as his body healed. He sensed they'd done as he'd asked because the ship started moving the right way again. He dragged himself to the corner and convalesced quietly there.

Over the next hour, he listened with half an ear as Confidence—the tall, spindly one—directed the escape operation from the radio. Auxiliary healed him, but quietly warned that he was under nine percent Skip capacity.

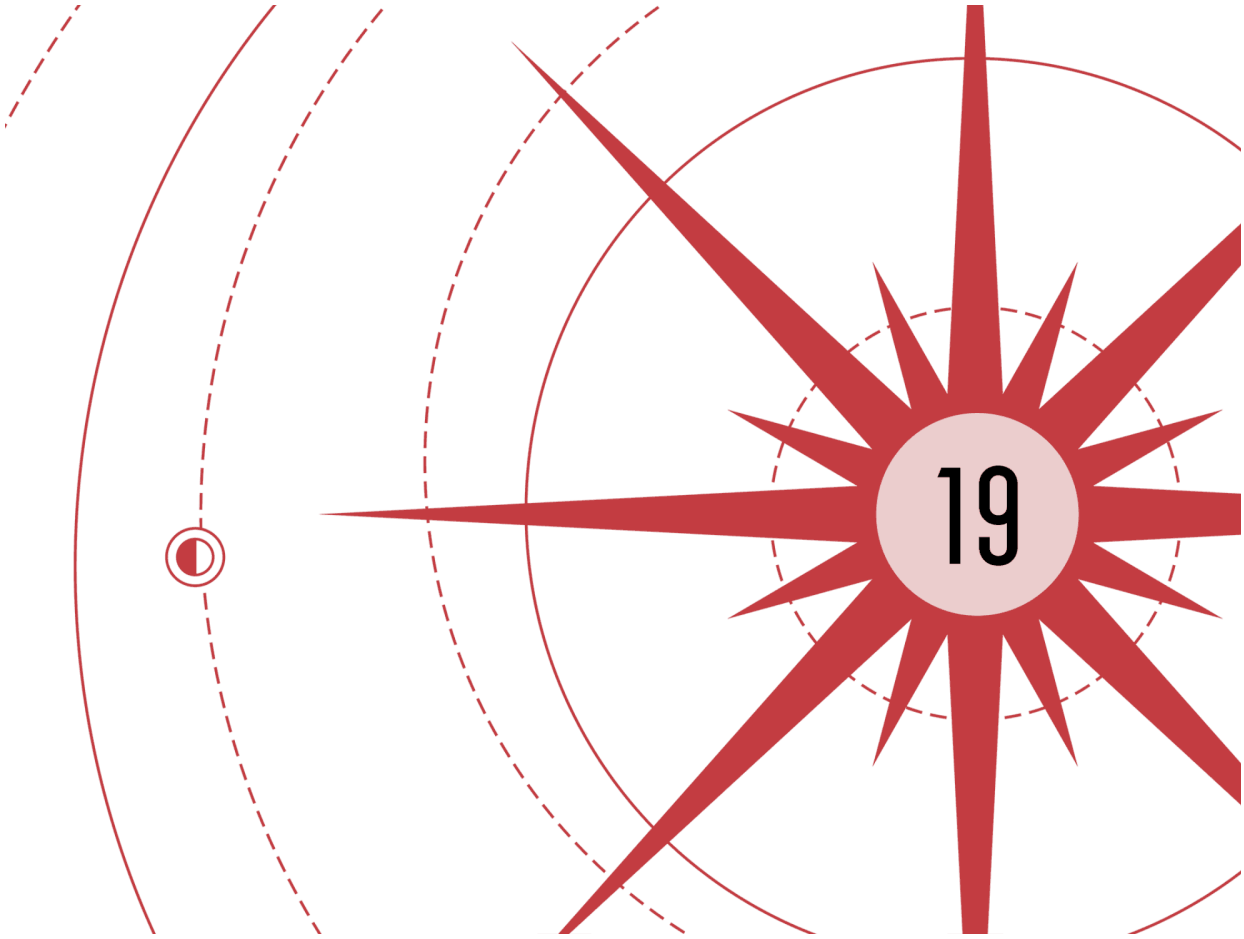
Sometime in there, Rebeke joined them. The light through the broken window grew dark as they fled.

He bore the pain with closed eyes. His body could take a great deal of punishment, thanks to the Torment's gifts. But even he needed a breather now and then. Especially after taking a beating that would have killed anyone else.

Still, he paid enough attention to hear worry in Confidence's voice as she directed the others. It seemed many of the Beaconites had escaped—and with their Beacon itself, they could guide everyone. But they were pressed and harried by the Cinder King's forces, who made them veer away from the path they wanted to take.

From what he gathered, they were forced to swerve to the south, entering a different "corridor" entirely. That was, so far as he understood, the local way of talking about certain latitudes. Each band of latitude was a corridor, with no actual geographic features to distinguish them—except that going too far north or south was dangerous.

Well, at least they had escaped. At least they were alive. Who cared if they were in another corridor? It couldn't be *that* bad. Could it?



THEY DIDN'T DISTURB him lying there on the floor—as they reformed Beacon and took casualty reports. Fifteen people captured. Ten percent of their population dragged off, to be left for the sun.

Eventually more officials arrived. He knew the three members of the Greater Good, along with Zeal—the little person who was, as best Nomad could determine, their approximation of a field commander or special ops planner. Also in attendance was Jeffrey Jeffrey—the man with the bushy black beard. As a sort of city steward or administrator, he had served under various incarnations of the Greater Good, offering continuity to a leadership trio that was usually made up of three old men or women in the months before they were turned into power sources.

Five other people joined in that he didn't know. Together, they convened to take stock after the disastrous attempt to find their legendary Refuge.

Auxiliary found it *hilarious* that they just left Nomad there. Lying on the floor, dozing. Like he was a sleeping dragon, dangerous to disturb.

Look how they arrange their chairs, the hero exclaims. Look, see it, Nomad. They don't dare scoot back, lest they bump you. Why don't they hold the meeting in another location? Or…you know…move you to a bed?

Nomad probably had one of his faces on. The one that said, "Don't touch me. I'm thinking about who to murder next, and I'm accepting volunteers."

Eventually the group started to discuss the real issue.

"We're dead," Confidence said, rising to speak. He could identify the tallest of the Greater Good from her voice, and pictured the spindly woman glaring at them all. "It is time to make our peace with Adonalsium."

"Pardon my brusqueness," a man Nomad hadn't met said, "but you are supposed to be the optimistic one! If it pleases you, give us hope."

"My title is Confidence," she replied. "My duty is to express what I know to be true with utmost energy of heart. It is not my duty to lie. I see no way out."

"We've been forced into an untenable corridor," Compassion agreed quietly. "This region has seen mountains for the last five years. We will soon encounter the heights. Beyond that, we haven't enough heat in our sunhearts to fly for much longer. We've divided them, shared them, and stretched the limits of our rationing."

"Even if we all gathered onto a few ships," Confidence said, "we won't last another rotation. We've gone too long without harvesting. After being driven off from one attempt, then abandoning the next, we're running on cold souls."

"Must we…surrender to the Cinder King?" Jeffrey Jeffrey asked softly.

Zeal pounded the table. "I'd rather die a cold death and leave my soul to light only the mud than give myself to *him*. Our souls would just further enforce his tyranny."

"Then what?" Compassion asked.

The entire room seemed to look toward Contemplation. Nomad cracked an eye to study her. With no hat and her hair back up in a black bun, she stood out even in a room full of people in similar clothing.

"Contemplation?" Compassion asked again. "You have a plan, surely?"

"I…can think of no plan," Contemplation admitted, "other than to die with pride, knowing we separated ourselves from that monster and fought him until the end. Elegy would be…proud to know that we never folded."

The room fell absolutely silent. Nomad decided it was time to make his entrance. Er, his, already-here-ance. He planned one of his master's grand

speeches, the type that really roused people. But before he could rise and make it, the people in the room started standing.

"We go on," one said.

"We go on," another replied.

Nomad sat up, watching them each stand, gathering strength from the others. They didn't need his speech, he realized. This group was tough as carapace. They didn't need something to rally or galvanize them. And today…they didn't even need a soldier.

They needed something he had once been. They needed someone who could fix problems.

Storms. Could he be that man for them? Did it matter? Even if he somehow got them to the entrance…it wouldn't save them. Still, he found their air of defiance more intoxicating than the Cinder King's liquor. And if there was something left of the man he'd been, it was a severe loathing for bullies—particularly those who picked on the defenseless.

So he stood up, joining them all. They turned, looking up at him, making way for him to approach the Greater Good's table. There, he pressed his hands down flat on the wood. "That bastard," he said, "broke his oath to me."

The three gawked at him.

"…And?" Contemplation said. "He's a murderer and a tyrant. Of *course* he is an oath breaker too."

"I don't really care about the rest," Nomad said. "But the Cinder King made it personal…so I'm going to kill him. I'd prefer to topple his kingdom before I go—as a parting gift."

"We would love to hand you that opportunity," Confidence said. "But I don't think you understand the seriousness of our problem. We've been forced into an untenable corridor—one with blockages preventing forward motion."

"We fly back out," Nomad said. "Hide in the darkness again."

"We've sent scouts," Zeal said from behind. "The Cinder King has posted guards and scouts *all along* our northern flank—he must have called up all of his subjects to send him ships! If we try to go back to the north, he will catch us."

"We're trapped here," Compassion whispered. "Enemies to the north, and mountains to the south and to the east."

"Mountains?" Nomad frowned. "Rebeke said something about this…but remind me. I thought the landscape rearranged each rotation. How are there

mountains?"

"Some larger features remain," Zeal explained. "There are always mountains at the poles, and those regions cannot be traveled. Sometimes they form in other places—and the ones in this region have been here for years now." He looked to the others, and his voice softened. "When they first rose, two entire cities were destroyed. I've scouted and tried to get through several times—to no avail. Originally Elegy thought that maybe if we could make this corridor tenable, we'd be able to escape the Cinder King."

"The mountains do melt and reform," Contemplation added. "But I offer this truth, Sunlit. Something about the core of our planet creates highlands here, and they are utterly impassable."

"I mean, we have flying ships," Nomad said. "We could go *over* them."

"Oh, *over* them!" Zeal said, smacking his forehead. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"I offer this explanation to your ignorance," Contemplation said. "Our engines cut out if we go too high. They roar and try, but we do not move—and then they die. Beyond that, people go unconscious if they spend more than a few minutes in the heights."

"Wait, how tall *are* these mountains?" Nomad asked.

"Tall," Zeal said. "At least a thousand feet."

A thousand feet? Like a single thousand?

At first, he assumed that the Connection had stopped working, and he hadn't interpreted those words correctly. These people were stymied by a set of "mountains" that would barely be considered hills on his homeworld? He'd lived in a city at over fifteen thousand feet elevation, back there.

And yet he wouldn't call them fools. Naive, maybe, but not idiots…

I'm lost, the knight says with an air of bafflement, commensurate with his solemn, dignity-ravaging intelligence. Am I understanding this right? What's going on?

"Math," Nomad realized. "Math is going on." He switched to their tongue. "Someone get me a pad of paper and something to write with."

When they resisted, he glared at them until someone who had been taking notes proffered the implements. A woman brought him a chair, and he settled down, rubbing his forehead. Writing came easily to him these days—strange to think that ability had once been considered unseemly to some back home.

He sketched out some equations, dredging far, far back—to a person he used to be. He thought through the way the hovercycles worked, picturing their engines. His best guess was that the engine mechanism somehow used

Investiture from these sunhearts to superheat the air, then sent it out those jets on the bottoms, providing upward thrust. Essentially their hovercraft relied on downward-pointing jet engines rather than lift from wings.

"Propellant," he muttered. "That's the problem. Up above, the air gets too thin to act as a propellant for your ships. Remarkable…"

The people slowly gathered around, and if they seemed shocked to see complex mathematics produced by their "Sunlit Man," a killer with a sour attitude…well, he didn't blame them one bit.

"What does this all mean?" Contemplation asked softly as he wrote.

"Your planet is really small," he said. "Like, almost *comically* small. It takes how long to complete a rotation again?"

"Around twenty hours," Contemplation said.

"Hmm. Give me a clock."

They provided one, and he was able—using his own internal sense of time—to do some vague reckoning. Their hours were shorter than his by roughly half. Factoring it in…yeah, that gave him something to work with.

He guessed their day was maybe ten hours galactic standard. The planet was small, and turned slowly enough that people could keep up in ordinary aircraft. He figured it was possible to fly all the way around in just four hours. Except you couldn't. You had to wait for the planet to turn, because if you got too far ahead, you ran straight into the sunlight.

Calculating that—with some measurements he demanded from the others—he arrived at the planet's diameter. From there, the answers lined up. He'd been fooled at first, since the gravity felt roughly similar to what he knew back home. Less than most worlds, but still within common ranges. He could test that with a few dropped objects. Regardless, that initial gut impression had given him a false sense that he understood the physics of the world. In reality, he had been way off.

"Most worlds with this kind of gravity," he explained, "are much bigger. You've got something dense at your core—Invested, I'd say, since no natural element could create this kind of a gravitational pull and leave the planet livable.

"Your atmosphere also seems to thin at an alarming rate. From my estimation, a thousand feet up, and you're well into the death zone. No wonder you only hover your ships thirty or forty feet in the air."

He looked up to a circle of blank faces.

I'm raising my hand, the knight says. You can't see it, but I am. Call on me.

"Okay…" Nomad said in Alethi.

Can I go take an art class instead, teacher?

"Auxiliary, you're *literally* a living manifestation of physical forces—sharing substance with the concepts of gravitation and the interaxial force. You should know about this stuff."

Uh, right. And just because you're made of meat and various strange liquids, every human is born knowing all about primate anatomy.

"Well, it would be a good idea to pay attention anyway," Nomad said, though admittedly he felt foolish saying it. If he'd paid better attention himself, he'd have figured this out earlier. The curvature of the planet, the low air pressure at ground level…these things were blazing signals of the planet's size.

He switched back to the local language. "Look. It makes perfect sense that your engines give out as they try to cross mountains. These ships move via the displacement of air."

"If it pleases you to be contradicted," Contemplation said, "they fly using sunhearts."

"Yes and no," he said. "You fly using engines powered by sunhearts as a fuel source—you could be running on *coal* and stay aloft, if you could somehow compensate for the weight of such a large furnace and heavy fuel. What makes ships like this move, though, is propellant and not fuel. You know, pushing something out to give you thrust upward? Air in this case? No?"

They gave him blank stares.

"How," he said, "can you fly advanced ships like these and have no grasp of basic aviation science? Fluid dynamics? The law of motion and countermotion?"

More blank stares. Except for one woman at the side. A few looked to her. A mechanic or an engineer, he guessed. She dressed like the others, but had oil stains on her gloves.

"I can grasp *some* of this, Sunlit," she said, staring at the numbers he'd written. "But you've got to understand. We're refugees among refugees. The Cinder King has scientists who might be able to understand what you're saying, but even they focus on keeping the cities moving.

"We don't have the time, the resources, the *lives* to waste in theorizing. We use what works. We can keep it running, replicate it, but…" She shrugged. "We just can't afford to think lofty thoughts when mortality looms on the horizon."

He could respect that. Storms, he *felt* it himself. How much time had *he* had for dreaming since he'd been on the run?

"All of this," Confidence said, waving at the equations he'd written out, "confirms what we already knew—that if we go too high, the engines stop working and we suffocate?"

You should tell her, the knight interjects, that is basically the entire point of math. Explaining stuff everyone already knows.

Some days he wished he'd bonded a Cryptic.

"Indeed, it tells us what we know, Confidence," he said. "But more usefully it tells us *why*. Which is the first step to fixing any problem."

"And can you fix this one?" Contemplation said. "In less than ten hours? Because that's when we're going to encounter those highlands."

Ten of their hours. Could he fix a problem like this in that amount of time?

Impossible.

"Absolutely," he said. "I'll need some things, not the least of which being access to whatever fabrication machines you have. Rebeke said you can make new ship parts from raw materials?"

"Yes," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "We can."

"Good. I need access to that, a quiet room, some tools, and…the Charred we captured. Rebeke's sister. For certain tests of a relevant nature."

They didn't question him. Good. He was still working on a way to escape his Torment, and he wanted a test subject to try out his theories on. Smart scientists did *not* experiment on themselves.

"Wait," Confidence said. "Even if a miracle occurs and we get over the mountain, we're still as good as dead. What about our dwindling power supply?"

"We'll find a way to get more," Nomad said.

"And the Cinder King?" she demanded. "The overwhelming forces we're facing? The fact that we keep losing people to his attacks, day after day? What is our objective here? What are you trying to accomplish, other than kill him? What is *our* final objective?"

"That's up to you," Nomad said. "I want to find that door. I'll do what I can to get you over those mountains, then get power to keep you going another day. Then we'll be back in this area and we can search again." He shrugged.

"That again?" Confidence said. "You yourself said that door wouldn't help us."

"I…" He trailed off.

She had a point.

"Peace, Confidence," Compassion said. The old woman, with ebony skin and tight curls of white hair, seemed so frail in her seat. She needed help to walk, and her voice wavered as she spoke. And yet there was a strength to her. The strength of someone who had bowed to the years, but not yet surrendered to them. A strength he understood, and respected.

"We were just," Compassion continued, "making our affirmations to die rather than return to the Cinder King. Is this not at least a tiny hope more than that? Our ancestors came to this land and survived against all reason and possibility. Do we not owe it to them to attempt whatever survival we can imagine, no matter how dim?"

"We searched the entire region," Confidence said, "and didn't find the door."

"It's near the place we looked," Compassion said. "It must be. We will find out where, and search there instead."

"And if the Refuge truly is just a myth?" Confidence asked. "If it's not real and never has been, as this man implies?"

The others fell silent.

"We need a miracle," Zeal whispered, standing up from his chair. "And I live for those, Greater Good. Even without the mountains…even if we had sunhearts…our path would be one of death without a dream. Without a dream, he will wear us down eventually and destroy us, no matter what we do. So yes, I'd prefer to trust a myth, Confidence. Instead of just stopping and embracing the sun."

Others nodded, and Nomad's stomach twisted. He looked down. Earlier, he'd been bolstered by their confidence, but now he found it strangely condemning. Of him, and the false opportunity his presence offered.

Try to believe, he thought to himself, *like they do. Try to pretend, at least, there is a hope for them. Who knows? You've been wrong before.*

"We're going to do it," he promised them, looking up. "We're going to cross those mountains and fly all the way around this cursed planet. We're going to loop back to where we started. And this time, we're going to *open* that doorway. It's better than lying down and dying."

"It is," Contemplation agreed. "Is that why you keep running?"

"So far," he said.

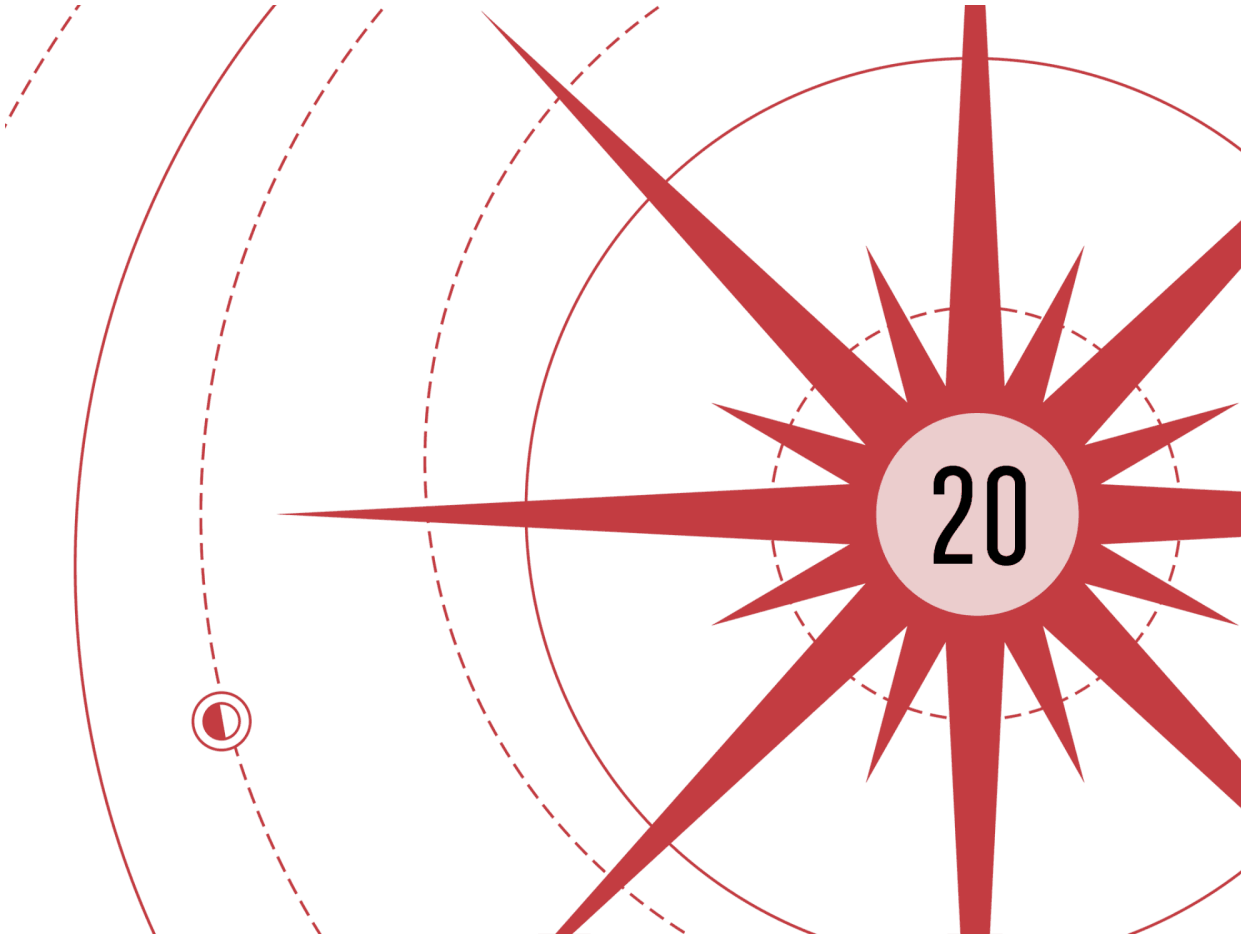
Confidence sat and nodded to herself. And he realized that perhaps she'd been playing a role. Expressing her true feelings, yes, but also offering the

argument that needed to be made—so it could be refuted. Pushing them to a solution by vocalizing the fears they all felt, giving them shape, and letting them be neutralized.

"We'll do it," Compassion whispered. "For our children. For our families. For ourselves."

Great. Now he just had to reengineer the basis of their aviation technology—retrofitting the engines of an entire city to work in a near-vacuum environment—in just a few hours.

He'd rather get beaten up again, because this would require the old him. The one who had failed so many times.



THEY GAVE HIM a little room near the center of the city. He found it… comfortably small. Like a workshop, with a wall for pinning notes above a utilitarian desk and a pull-out cot in the corner. Though hardly grand, there was a pleasant lived-in quality to the space that he liked.

They soon brought him a small engine, taken from one of the hovercycles, and placed it on the workbench. It was only the size of a large melon. After that, they brought Elegy, dragging her by her arms, which were chained together at the wrists.

He hadn't seen the Charred since helping "rescue" her during that initial escape. A group of six men worked to chain her to the wall as she struggled. He studied her in more detail, seated at his desk. She appeared to be in her late thirties. There was one ember mark glowing on her left cheek, and her silvery black hair was cut short. Like her sister, she had light green eyes, and she gave him plenty of opportunities to see them as she raged against her captors.

The men finally left, several nursing wounds from being kneed or elbowed. Even in chains, this woman was dangerous. Her ember—glowing from the ashen cavity of her chest, where her heart should have been—flared dramatically as she fought against the chains. If she hadn't been so Invested—the power reinforcing her very skin and muscles—she would have injured herself in her furious attempts to rip free.

"This was her room, once," Contemplation said from the doorway. "I had hoped it might spark some kind of memory…"

From the way Elegy resisted, he doubted it was doing anything. Still, the fact that it had been her place indicated he'd have liked this woman, had she not been burned until only the ashes of her soul remained.

"Why do you want her?" Contemplation asked.

"I need to understand your power sources," Nomad said. "These sunhearts…they aren't quite like anything I've seen on any other planet." He nodded to Elegy. "She has one right in her core. I want to run a few tests."

"Will they hurt her?"

"I can't promise either way," he said. "But I don't expect them to."

Contemplation nodded thoughtfully, her dark hair smoothed into a beehive, making her seem taller than she was. "There are those among us," she finally said, "who will be mightily upset with you if anything unfortunate happens to Elegy."

He nodded. "You're not one of those, though?"

"I knew Elegy well," Contemplation said. "I spoke for her many times during the months she encouraged our rebellion. Once I was named to the Greater Good, I voted to name her to the position of Lodestar. An appointed position, the one who navigates a city along its route. For us, it was more than just that—it was a person to offer plans. We are the city's leaders, but she was its heart. We followed her vision." She nodded toward the woman chained to the wall. "That thing isn't Elegy. You can't hurt her, Sunlit. She's already dead."

Then Contemplation stepped toward him, removed the glove from her hand, and held it up, palm forward. She seemed to expect something from him. Hesitant, he put his hand up before hers—but did not touch.

"You draw nothing?" she said.

"I'm led to believe," he said, "that it's not good etiquette to take heat from others."

"Unless it's offered," Contemplation said, nodding to her hand. "This is an act of thanks for us, Sunlit. A display of vulnerability and willingness to

trust. You saved my life, through great pain and risk. Thank you."

So with that explanation, he pressed his palm to hers. "Your Breath become mine," he whispered, trying a Command to see if he could draw out her heat. It didn't work, of course. But it had been worth a shot, and besides, the ceremony meant something to her.

She grew teary-eyed. "When you burst through that window," she said, "I knew you were him. A Sunlit Man of the stories. I knew it again when you offered us hope to continue our eternal pilgrimage."

"I'm not what you think, Contemplation," he said. "I'm *really* not. But right now, if it will keep you all moving, then you can call me whatever you storming want."

The elderly woman smiled. "I'm pleased I got to see you." She retreated then, leaving him alone with a glowing madwoman. Well, that and his semifunctional conscience.

Do you really think you can do this? the hero asks, dubious but curious.

Nomad settled down at the desk, but continued watching Elegy, who had stopped thrashing and instead devoted herself to glaring at him. "I think," he said to Auxiliary, "that I don't have any other options. Fortunately they have the difficult part solved."

They do?

He opened a blank notebook. "Sure. They have a compact, powerful, renewable energy source. Something most developing societies can only dream about. *That's* difficult. Travel has always been about the power supply. Creating energy—well, releasing it—is easy. Just throw a match into a pile of dried-out wood and you'll see that. But harnessing it? Making it *portable*? That's the problem."

If it's so easy, Auxiliary replied as Nomad started writing and sketching, *then what happens when they get into those mountains? Why do their engines stop working?*

"The engines don't stop working," he said. "They keep right on releasing energy, but there's nothing for them to *do* with it. Most conventional travel involves one basic principle: equal and opposite reactions. From jet engines to horse-drawn carriages, it's all about the primary laws of motion."

And a jet engine needs air to provide thrust?

"Yes," he said. "It's more complicated, but in general, a jet engine works by forcing air through a small nozzle. In most cases, it's superheated air that has passed through a turbine, and the resulting *thrust* is what moves the ship. Air shooting out the back of the engine."

So…no more air…no more thrust?

"Exactly," he said, pointing at the small engine. "I suspect these sides here are air intakes. They draw in a great deal of it, then the sunheart superheats it in this structure here—some kind of compressor—maybe even generates *plasma*, which would be wild. Look at this. See these nozzles in here? That's where the superheated air—and perhaps even some Investiture turned to raw energy—bursts out. That gives us the lift and the fiery glow we see."

And what about space flight, where there is no air? How do other ships do it?

That was still relatively new. Well, the science was old, depending on which parts of the cosmere you visited. But few had ever experimented with it until the last hundred years or so. Why take all the effort to travel the void of space when there were easier ways to travel between planets?

Trick was, most of those were slow, usually involving months or even years of walking through another dimension. You could fly there too, but could only get out at specific points. Faster methods that could go anywhere were just starting to be explored, but they were proportionally more difficult in their own ways. Either that, or they had some storming terrible side effects. His own experience proved that.

Even so, more and more people in the cosmere inched toward understanding the difficult, but plausible, methods that had been out of reach until scientific practicality matched theoretical dreaming.

"For space flight," he said to Aux's question, "you usually bring your own propellant. A rocket engine will often mix a fuel and an oxidizer—but the point is that the mass of those two is ejected from the back of the engine at high speed. Mass and energy expelled out the back makes *you* go forward. These sunheart-powered engines don't carry fuel with them."

So we do that.

"How much liquid oxygen you got handy?" he asked. "How about kerosene? Rocket fuel is not common stuff, Aux. I doubt we could put anything together in time, and I know of no sources of zephyr aether on this planet. Do you?"

Then…we're ruined?

"No," he said, beginning work on a diagram. "They've got plenty of one thing: water. It's pounding on the rooftop right now. Plus they have, as I said, the hard part in hand: supercompact, energy-rich fuel. It can heat things without needing oxygen. So if we get a boiler working and steam jets coming out the bottom…"

Wait. You're going to power space flight with a steam engine?

"I guess I am," he said. "Though I'd call it high-atmosphere flight rather than proper space flight. Anyway, you'd be surprised how many modern sources of energy rely on the same principle. The problem with traditional steam engines—well, one of the big ones—has always been the fact that the fuel is outrageously bulky and heavy. Not practical for much beyond a large-scale engine on rails with a lot of towing capacity. I'm telling you, though, this is how all motion works."

All motion? the knight asks hesitantly. What about when we'd fly together in the past?

Nomad froze. That *had* been different. He'd misspoken, of course. Not all motion was due to the factors he'd indicated. There were other kinds, like fundamental laws of attraction. One body to another. Forces that held all matter together, at the level of the axon.

"That was different," he admitted.

I used to love that, Aux said. *Before…*

Nomad breathed out heavily, squeezing his eyes shut.

It wasn't your fault.

"I said yes to Hoid. And I bonded you."

You didn't know what either would do.

"I let the Dawnshard consume us, Auxiliary. I let it *feed* on you."

I salvaged a little. This bit of my mind. The last fragment of my soul.

Wit's fault as much as it was Nomad's. Done ostensibly to protect the cosmere. Wit had asked him to carry something known as a Dawnshard, a well of unimaginable Investiture designed as a weapon.

Nomad didn't know the specifics. Only that the result of trying to help was a dead friend—reduced to a voice in his head—and entire armies trying to hunt him. He'd accepted that terrible weapon to hide it, and that power had warped his soul. Worse, he hadn't known, hadn't realized, that bonding Auxiliary would lead to such a tragedy.

They'd spent years together with the potential lurking there, unseen. Then, in a moment of need, he'd unconsciously reached out for any energy source he could access. The Dawnshard had found Auxiliary, a being of Investiture.

It had turned Aux's *very substance* into power to fuel Nomad's abilities.

The Dawnshard—the weapon—protected itself. No matter what. No matter who it killed. Nomad had barely been able to stop himself before burning the entirety of Auxiliary's soul away in a moment of supercharged power.

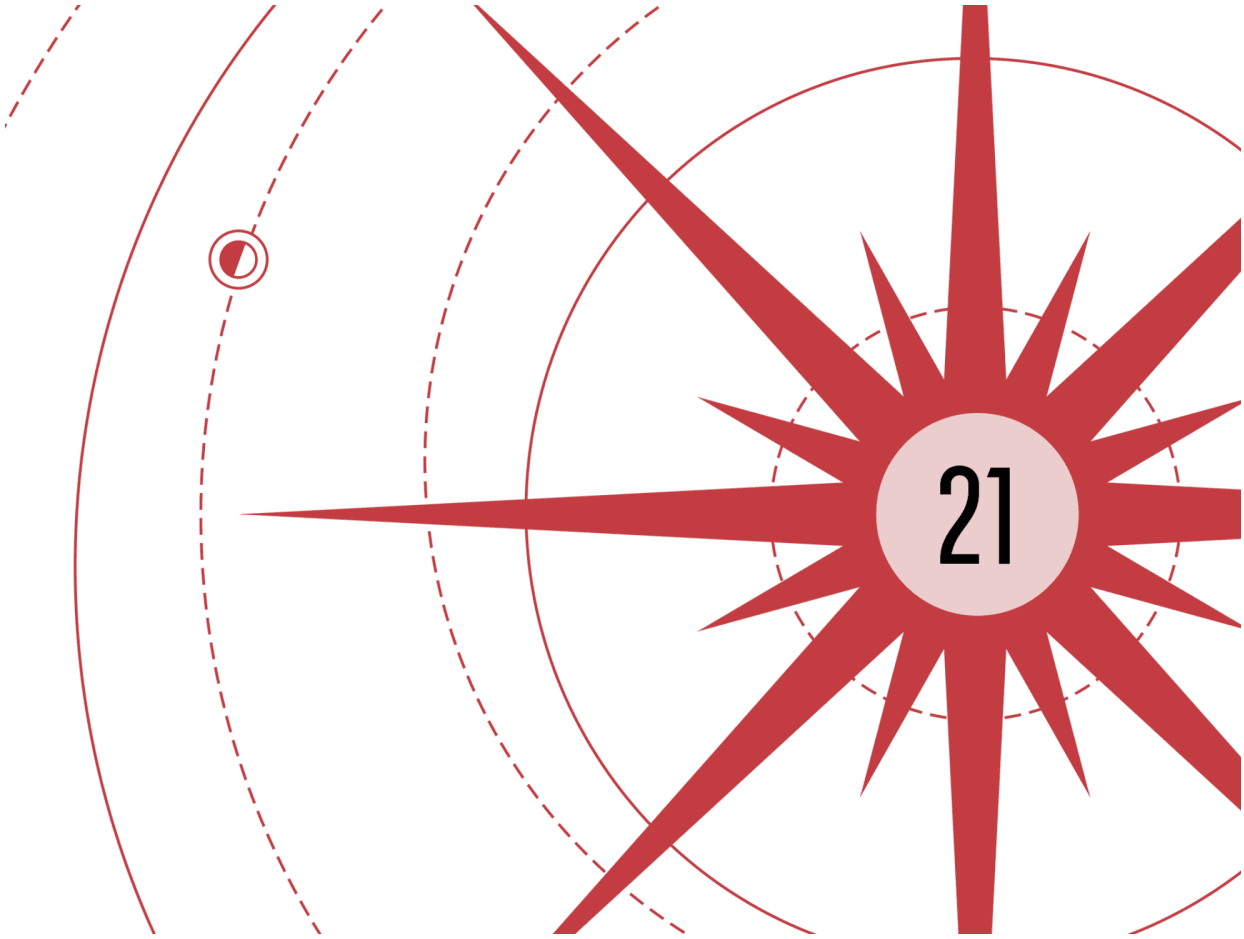
This is not the time for regret, the knight chides softly. You have some very large problems to solve.

He was right. Nomad opened his eyes and fished in his pocket, bringing out the drained sunheart that had been left after he'd ingested the Investiture. It felt like glass in his fingers—a small cylindrical lump of smokestone eight inches tall and a few in diameter. The surface was marked with ridges and a kind of grain, like melted wax. It was random, of course, but he could *swear* that one section looked like a screaming face…

Rebeke said this thing had been able to power a ship for *months*. That kind of power wasn't part of most souls, not even Threnodite souls. Something else was happening. Power was being drawn from another place, with the soul acting as a kind of seed or starter. But why had the Rosharan sunheart the Cinder King showed him been so small? Why hadn't it acted as a similar seed?

He stared at the notebooks and felt a building dread. This was the sort of thing he'd run from, even before the chase truly began. Failures that wrapped his heart like barbed wire, stretching back to his childhood. But it was either this or go crawling to the Cinder King and take his offer of employment. Nomad intended to consider that only if the Night Brigade itself were at the door. So he accepted his lot.

And started drawing up schematics.



TWO HOURS LATER, he had fully drawn schematics, though he had no idea if they would work. The plan wasn't to fabricate all-new engines, but to modify the ones they had to intake water, superheat it to steam, and use it for propellant instead.

It was a slapdash fix. Hopefully it would work. There were some changes he knew he'd need to make, but his brain was growing numb. He needed a break, at least from that problem.

He ignored the cot for now, though he was as tired as ever. Best he could tell, the people of Beacon didn't sleep on regular schedules—indeed, it seemed like the entire *planet* lived on a strange "take hour-long naps when you feel like it" system. Rebeke had been baffled by his explanation that where he came from, people all generally slept at the same time—and for some eight hours at that.

Anyway, he didn't want to sleep yet. He washed up at a basin they'd given him and checked himself in the little hand mirror. He had a faint patina of

stubble on his chin, and his hair had fully regrown—his body, as always, eventually adapted to match how he'd looked when he first took the Dawnshard all those years ago. He tossed the mirror aside, straightening the buttoned shirt they'd given him, and pulled his chair over to Elegy, who was still chained to the wall.

It's not just me, right? the knight asks. It is bizarre that you have a woman chained to your wall, isn't it?

"It is admittedly bizarre."

And you want her…why?

"I think her condition and mine might be similar," he said, narrowing his eyes at Elegy. "When I adopted the Dawnshard from Wit, it created my Torment. Too much Investiture, taken in too quickly, warping my very being."

Why didn't it warp Wit?

"I think it did. He just hides it well. Either way, when I gave away the Dawnshard, it left me changed. With a kind of scar tissue on my soul. That's the Torment. The strange Connection I have to all places at once, the ability to feed on Investiture, the ability to Skip from location to location—but also the curse of not being able to fight back.

"A Dawnshard is one of the primal forces of creation, and the one we carried is diametrically opposed to the concept of violence and harm. The scar tissue on my soul has that same Intent, that same requirement of its host: that I be unable to harm anyone at all for any reason."

It's ironic, you know, the hero says. Because of the way the Dawnshards were used…

"To kill God. Yes, I know." He sat back, thoughtful, meeting Elegy's glare. "She's got something similar, I'm guessing. A canker on her soul. The Cinder King's fire burned away her memories and personality, but there's no reason that should make her so violent, so enraged. I can't figure out how he controls creatures like her. It has to do with some kind of Connection or… well, scar tissue."

On the soul. That makes her violent, where yours makes you the opposite.

"Basically yes," he said.

When you were following your oaths, your natural need to follow them pushed through the scar tissue, though.

"It did, for a time," he said. "But now I feel like the scar is getting worse, Aux. I need to do something to stop that growth or, better, make it recede.

Enough that I can fight, but not so far that I'm unable to Skip away from this planet."

Ideally he'd eventually clear it *all* away, severing his lingering Connection to the Dawnshard. So long as he retained that Connection, he was a link to whoever held it now. And so long as he could locate one of the most powerful weapons in all the cosmere, people would hunt him.

That was too big a problem to deal with at the moment. For now, he'd settle for any kind of therapy that suppressed his symptoms. He'd love to be able to fight back the next time a Charred tried to kill him.

He brought out the drained sunheart again, turned it over in his fingers. "These people," he said, "can transfer Investiture to one another through touch. And their highly Invested souls become these power sources when bombarded long enough by the sun. I'm hoping that I can find a way to siphon a little of my soul into this drained sunheart, taking some of the scar tissue with it. Follow?"

Vaguely, yes. It will be like lancing a boil.

"Yes, but not so gross."

Everything about mortals is gross. But siphoning off your soul…won't that, I don't know, hurt?

"Not if it's a very small amount," he said. "Plus, it will regrow, as will the scar. Human souls are resilient things, Aux. Like our bodies, they self-repair."

It was different for beings like Auxiliary. His essence had been burned away during the tragedy, leaving only this last, limited remnant.

So…you're going to use that rock to try to siphon off whatever soul sickness is making Elegy act so angry. If it works, you're going to try it on yourself, hoping you can cure your own soul sickness. Is that about the short of it?

"Indeed."

Rebeke probably wouldn't appreciate you experimenting on her sister like that.

"Probably not."

That might be why she is hiding outside your door, eh? Listening in?

He paused. "She is?"

Ah! Didn't you notice? I mean, someone is making small noises out there. I'll admit, I'm only guessing it is her. Powerful though I am, clairvoyance isn't on my list of abilities. But it does seem like it would be her, considering how the person keeps pressing against the door—as if trying to hear.

Yeah, Auxiliary was probably right.

I really thought you'd noticed, the knight says loftily, otherwise I'd have said something.

"Don't lie," he said with a smile. "You like showing off."

I love showing off, the knight exclaims. It feels so good. Why do mortals have taboos against it?

"We have taboos against everything that is fun," he said, still toying with the drained sunheart. If he was right, then everyone on this world had this same strange Connection to one another, allowing the ability to transfer parts of themselves. And this empty power source had held a distilled version of someone's soul, so it should work too, right?

However, when he tried touching the object to Elegy, nothing happened. Even when he braced himself, reached in, and touched it to her ember. She railed at him, and he heard a thump at the door as Rebeke shifted.

He pulled back, making a note in his book. He hadn't actually expected it to be that easy.

Investiture responded to human thought. It wasn't technically energy or matter—but it could *become* either. Investiture, energy, and matter were all one, as per Khriss's Second Law. It couldn't be created or destroyed; it could only change from one state to another.

However, Investiture responded differently from energy or matter. You could Command it. More precisely, the mindset you reached by speaking those Commands enabled you to enforce your will upon it. That was common across many of the flavors and varieties of power around the cosmere. Commands, oaths, incantations…any way to focus your will, your Intent, and project it to the Investiture.

Like the Command he'd tried with Contemplation earlier, which came from the planet Nalthis to make Investiture flow between bodies.

Today he tried almost all the ones he knew, in a variety of styles, as he pressed the sunheart against Elegy's exposed arm and ordered it to drain her heat. Nothing happened, and each failure was frustrating, suggesting that he didn't really know what he was doing.

He slumped down in his seat, tapping his head against the backrest. There *was* power locked away inside of Elegy, power that made her stronger, faster, more resilient. How to get at it? After some thought, he decided he probably didn't know the right Commands. There were methods using tones and vibrations that might work, but he didn't have that equipment—and he

knew that heat, at least, transferred naturally between people here. That gave him his best clue to the mechanism of moving Investiture on this planet.

If this theory was even viable—which he couldn't say for certain—success would depend on using the local ways that people here invoked or evoked their power. So he'd need something familiar to this people, their particular way of organizing thoughts and will. But what would the local variety of that be? Not oaths, but…

The moment it occurred to him, it seemed obvious. "Rebeke!" he shouted in their tongue. "Would you come in here a moment? I need to ask you something."

The soft sounds at the door stopped. Then a sheepish Rebeke opened the door and stepped in.

Pretend, the knight says, I have a very smug expression on right now.

Rebeke glanced at her sister, looking relieved to find her unharmed. She then turned to Nomad, clearly expecting a scolding, which he didn't offer. He'd probably have listened in too, in her situation.

Nomad pointed to Elegy. "Didn't you mention that your people have some kind of ritual prayer they say before sharing heat with another person or, more importantly, before *taking* it?"

"There…are several," she said. "Why?"

"Tell me the situations."

"Well, there's one said between a husband and wife," she said, "before… intimacy."

Wow. Ritual prayers before sex. Sounds…fun?

"Anything else?"

"Prayer before first touching a loved one," she said. "Prayer of thanks before offering heat to one who has protected or served you. Prayer when with the dying, to take their heat before it fades away—"

He sat straighter in his chair.

"We only do it if someone is dying for certain!" she exclaimed. "And only for one who desperately needs the heat, to help them with a sickness or weakness!"

That's cute, the knight says. She thinks you care about their social customs. How endearing.

"Tell it to me," he said.

"Um… Blessed Adonalsium, accept this soul and reward them for their heat given. Bold one on the threshold of death, give me your dying heat that I may bless those who still live."

Perfect. A forced removal of Investiture, ritualized with a formal Command. He snatched the sunheart off the table and pressed it to Elegy's arm, drawing another growl. He said the words exactly as Rebeke had.

Nothing happened.

"You're trying to transfer her heat to the sunheart?" Rebeke said. "It won't work like you think. We've tried, and while we can store some heat in a depleted sunheart, it doesn't give enough power to fly ships."

Confirmation, the knight muses, that their souls aren't powerful enough to make sunhearts on their own. It's not just a congealed soul—the bombardment of sunlight is required to supercharge the thing, creating the power source.

"How do you do it?" Nomad asked her. "Transfer heat into a sunheart?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "It's not often used."

He thought a moment, then tried again, changing the words. "Bold one on the threshold of death, give this *sunheart* your heat, that it may bless those who still live." The tweak might be enough to…

No. Again, nothing happened.

"Why are you trying this?" Rebeke said. "I don't understand. There's really no use in transferring heat to a sunheart—it's not alive, so it can't appreciate the gift."

"Cosmereologically," he said, "you'd be surprised at the wide range of definitions of 'alive' and 'dead.' Regardless, I need to know how to transfer a bit of someone's soul into a sunheart."

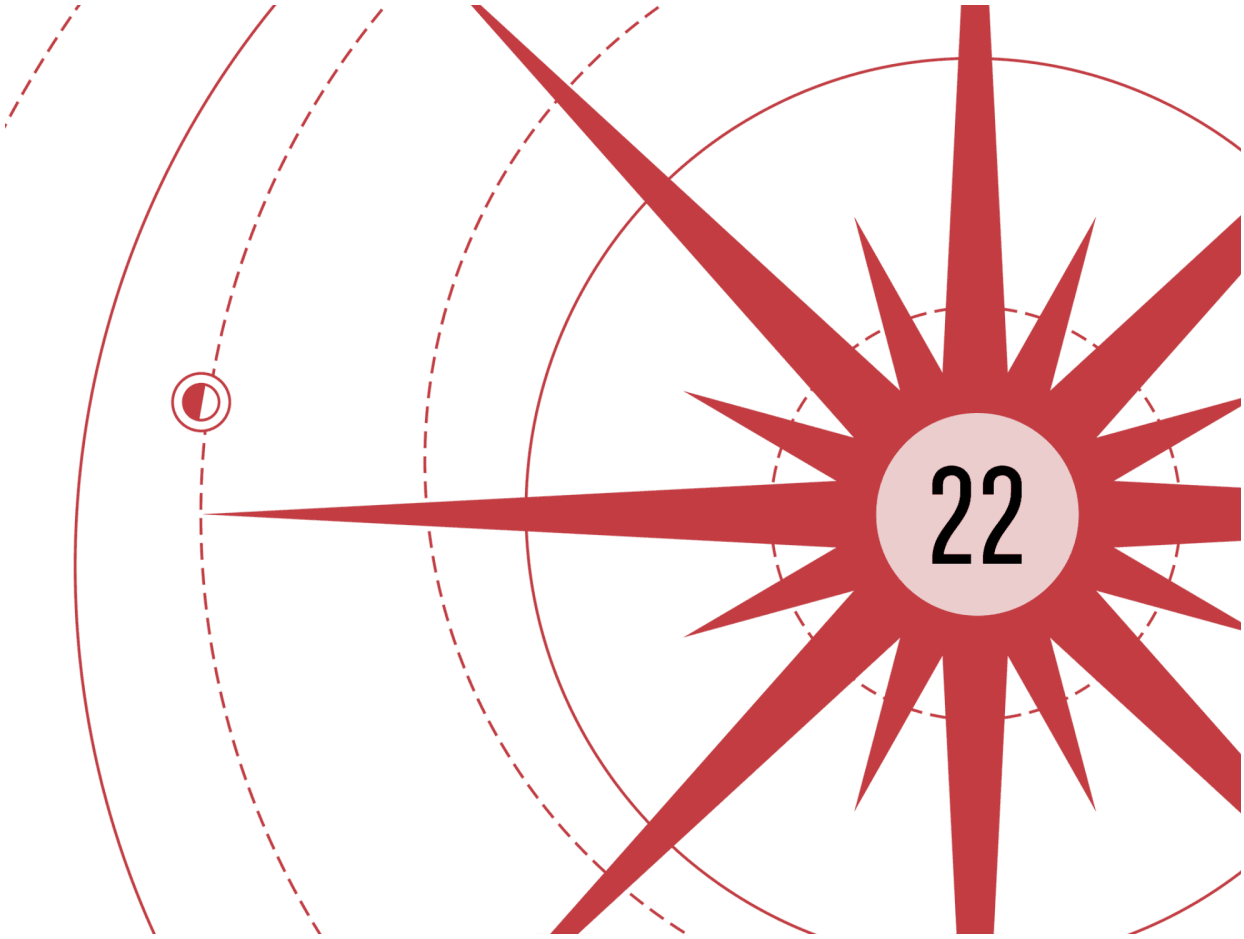
"Why?" Rebeke demanded. "What are you trying to do?"

"Explore the nature of your power sources," he said. But unfortunately he was at a dead end here. And they were several hours closer to death on the slopes of an approaching mountain. He took the notebooks with his schematics from the table and held them up. "I need to build a prototype of my engine design. Quickly. You told me your people could fabricate parts."

"We can't fabricate for you," she said. "But our ancestors can."

He paused. "So…wait. You can't do it anymore?"

"No, we never could," she said. "But our *ancestors* can." She looked to him. "I suppose it's time to introduce you to the ghosts."



THEY WERE KEPT on Beacon's largest ship, a cylindrical vessel that served as a central hub. Nomad had learned that Beacon didn't always assemble in the exact same way; ships would hook together and spread out organically. Metal sheets placed over holes made it look more cohesive than it was.

Some general rules were followed, however. Larger ships in the middle. Smaller, faster ships on the outside. And this hub structure at the very center. He'd taken it for a large meeting room, but as they stepped inside, he realized it held something far different: an enclosure for the dead.

They had configured it like an aquarium. An enormous glass drum, twenty feet tall and twice that wide, dominated the room, leaving only a narrow circle around it for observation. They'd filled the central column with smoke. A shifting white mist, like—

Like leaking souls, he thought, walking up to the glass, hands in the pockets of his long brown leather coat. He was accompanied by Rebeke and

Zeal—who had gotten permission from the Greater Good to bring him to this hallowed ground. A rack on one wall, opposite the large aquarium, held depleted sunhearts.

"Have you ever," he asked, glancing at the tens of lifeless sunhearts, "left those out again in the sunlight?"

"Of course we have," Rebeke said. "They don't recharge. We can't even find them afterward most of the time, but the few we've recovered were as dull as when we left them."

Damnation. That made sense, though. They'd of course tried that—probably one of the first things they had tried. He looked back at the aquarium—they called the enclosure itself the Reliquary. He found that name oddly inappropriate. These weren't relics. Those were usually the bodies or body parts of holy ones whose souls had departed. This was presumably the opposite.

He didn't see them at first. He only saw that shifting mist. It was light and effulgent, but thick. If the dead existed inside that chamber, he couldn't—

A face formed from the mists and pressed up against the glass, eyes glowing red, hands—made of smoke—slamming against the barrier. It had a gaunt face with a drooping jaw and sunken cheeks.

Nomad jumped despite himself. Even though he'd been expecting it, seeing a shade was unnerving. When he'd been on Threnody, these things had been incredibly dangerous. Society contorted around their existence, living by strict rules to avoid angering them. When the eyes went red, these things were deadly, seeking to kill. Yet here, the people of Beacon kept them like…pets?

"We fled the Evil," the ghost said in a whispering voice, like rustling papers. Another appeared over its shoulder, just a vague, smoky outline of a person with red eyes. "Then we fled Threnody. We are your Chorus. We remember. We came here, to the land of the twilight rings, to make our own world. Do not forget. Adonalsium will claim us eventually. Live. And remember."

Well, the knight says, at least we know how they keep their lore straight through the generations.

"On your homeworld," Nomad said, "these things kill people."

"They'd kill us," Zeal said, "if we went into the Reliquary."

"Are they self-aware?" Nomad asked.

"I sustain an uncertainty in that regard," he replied. "They'll answer questions sometimes. Other times they give no answers, only recitations."

"They mostly only talk about the past, though," Rebeke said. She'd stepped up beside him and watched intently through the glass. "About lore, history. Almost nothing about themselves. Each member might as well be interchangeable. We don't know if they remember their individual lives. They're like…living history books."

"'Living' being a loose term," Zeal added.

Nomad nodded, thoughtful. "That's far more than what I'd expect from them, knowing the shades of Threnody."

"We were the first who died on Canticle," a shade whispered to him. "The first to live in this land and devise the designs of flight—based on the ships that brought us here. But then we died and rose as shades. Remembering."

"Shades do not remember," another said. "We are not shades. We are the Chorus of the people."

"But others," another said, pressing against the glass, "must be given to the sun. This is the sun's land."

"Do this not," the first said, "and shades will overrun the world. Such a small planet. They will take everything. They would rip and destroy you."

"As we would," another added, "if allowed. To taste the flesh of the living. To drink their heat."

"So sweet," another said.

"So sweet," the first agreed.

"They…do that too," Zeal added. "Talk about killing us. It's rather unnerving."

Such invigorating places you take me, Nomad.

"There!" Rebeke said, pointing. "There, it's *him*."

"You don't know that, Rebeke," Zeal said softly.

"What?" Nomad asked, noting the way she stood so close to the glass, peering into the mist. "Him?" It took him only a moment to realize. "Your brother?"

"I saw his face among them," Rebeke said.

“We think that maybe,” Zeal said, “people who die without being given to the sun are drawn to join the Chorus. They say that shades will rise from those who die and don’t become sunhearts, but we rarely experience that—instead, sometimes after a death, we see mist gather and move to the Reliquary.”

“It was him,” Rebeke said. She seemed to be trying to convince herself. “Though he spoke like the others, as if he’d been there from the beginning…”

Nomad didn’t have much reason to care either way. “What does this have to do with my engine designs?”

“Show them the schematics,” Zeal said.

“The ghosts,” he said flatly, “are engineers.”

“No,” Zeal said. “They’re… Well, you’ll see.”

Nomad sighed and pressed his designs against the glass. The red eyes gathered around, faces crowding to see, mouths moving as they whispered—but they didn’t say anything intelligible. They inspected all seven pages, one at a time, as he held them up. Then they faded back into the mists.

Zeal waved to the side, where a man stood on watch. A worker? A guard? A clergyman? Some combination of the three? He engaged some machinery and lowered a piece of unrefined metal from storage. The chunk was wide and flat, with dirt still stuck to the bottom. It looked like it had pooled on the surface of the ground when it was liquid, then hardened there.

More such followed. Some copper, he thought, and a variety of other metals—while that first and largest piece had been mostly iron. It all entered the mists from the top, and Nomad realized with discomfort that there was no lid on this enclosure. Inside, the mist churned and grew brighter.

“What are they doing?” he asked Rebeke quietly.

“Building your machinery.”

“How, though?”

“We don’t know. You put in resources. You show them detailed instructions, and you get out the thing you want.”

“When a new settlement is founded,” Zeal said, “we always take some of the smoke. We’re not sure how far we can divide it—but it’s worked so far. You can transport it in special containment devices. We took some of it from Union, along with an older containment unit acquired by absorbing a smaller community.”

“How long will the fabrication take?” Nomad asked. If they were building something, why was the enclosure so silent?

"Depends," Zeal said. "For something like this, under an hour. They're faster when it's something they've done before, though."

Under an hour to fabricate complicated machinery? He wasn't going to complain—though even if it was true, their deadline was going to be very tight.

I think they're building it like I build things from myself, Auxiliary said. *You've seen this before. You use it every day, Nomad.*

"You don't absorb raw materials and spit out permanent devices," he said.

Yes, but isn't that actually more reasonable than what we do?

Well…maybe it was. He'd grown so accustomed to Auxiliary that he sometimes didn't consciously appreciate how extraordinary the spren was, using up only a minimal amount of Investiture from Nomad for each manifestation. That said, this *did* explain why so few on this planet had acted shocked by what Auxiliary could do. He supposed if your entire society was based on arcane mists materializing objects at your whims, Aux fit right in.

"Would you like something to eat while you wait, Sunlit?" Zeal asked.

"Sure. The spicier the better."

"Spicy?" Zeal asked, as if the word were unfamiliar.

"Just bring me anything," Nomad said with a sigh.

Zeal nodded, leaving Nomad and Rebeke standing beside the glass, watching the shifting mists inside. Someone out there in the cosmere would probably be *fascinated* by this. Threnodite shades who were somewhat self-aware? And who could rearrange the structure of metal as if it were Investiture to be sculpted? Maybe that was why the Scadrians were here, in their secretive research station beneath the ground.

Thinking of that, of course, reminded him of how much he had yet to do. Even if the modified engine worked—which it wouldn't, not on the first try—he had to find a way to get this people enough power to survive the rotation. And even if they did *that*, they needed a way to find the opening to the Scadrian base. How could they manage that? Presumably the only ones who really knew its location were living in it.

No. The Cinder King knows… he thought. *So how do we get the information out of him…*

"You don't like it, do you?" Rebeke said from beside him.

He frowned, not following her.

"Being called Sunlit," she said. "You grimaced when Zeal said the name. And earlier you asked us to call you Nomad."

"No, I don't care for Sunlit," he said. "You're right."

“Why? It’s a title of honor, of great respect.”

“Anyone Invested to the level I am could have survived a few seconds in the sunlight. Even if the term is one of honor—which I can understand—I don’t think it means anything. I like to earn my titles, and I don’t feel I did anything particularly interesting in this case.”

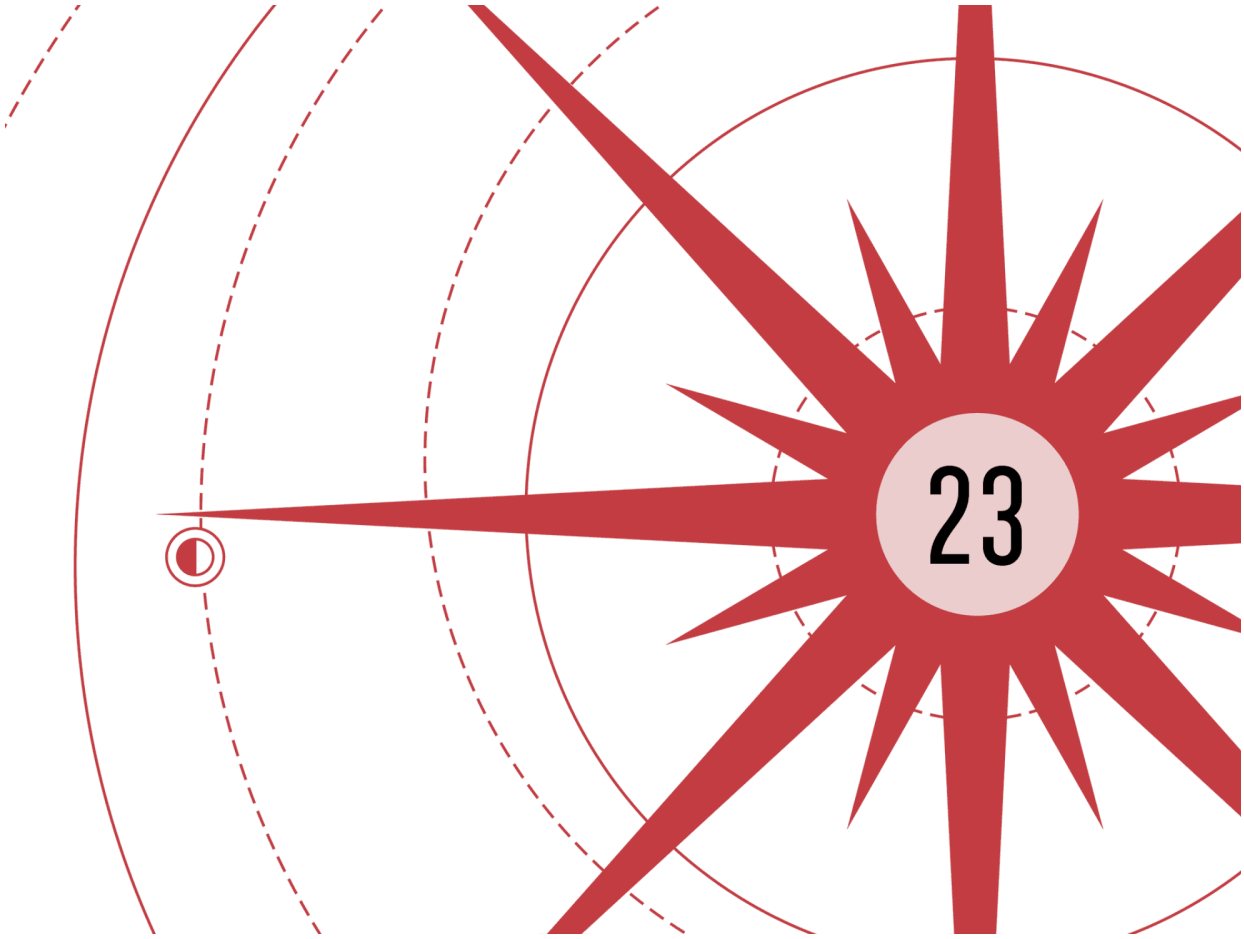
She nodded slowly at that. “But earlier you told Contemplation you didn’t mind if she called you that. Why say such a thing if it bothers you?”

“Because,” he said, “sometimes it’s not about you individually. Sometimes it’s about being a symbol. Sometimes you just adopt the name you’re given because it inspires people. I’ve seen it happen. Didn’t think it would happen to me.”

Zeal returned with some snacks, and they continued waiting. Eventually, after about forty-five minutes, the glow in the enclosure faded. The worker operated the simple crane to bring from the mists a realization of Nomad’s schematics: parts to modify their engines.

“Now what?” Rebeke asked, sounding excited.

“Now,” Nomad replied, “we install this on an engine and watch it explode.”



IT WAS A FINE explosion. Lit up the darkness with a flare of orange and yellow as the housing for the engine gave out. He probably hadn't made it thick enough; he'd worried about that.

They stood at the edge of Beacon as it flew, looking out over the darkness. With some help, he'd installed the parts on a small hovercycle engine, then used another hovercycle to take it out and test it. They'd activated the prototype engine a short distance away via remote. It had soared up, and then…

The flash of its failure washed over the group and made several of them jump, even though Nomad had warned them to expect it.

"So that's it," Compassion said. The frail woman had been provided a seat from which to watch the experiment. "Our deaths are sealed."

"Hardly," Nomad said. "I *told* you it would explode."

"If we strap those to our ships, we'll be strapping ourselves to bombs!"

“We’re not going to use *those* engines,” Nomad said. “You *expect* the first one to fail. We iterate now. Build another prototype, a better one, and see what happens to it. And so forth.”

“And so forth?” Contemplation said, arms folded. Lit only by the running lights of the ships forming the city, her pale skin took on a spectral quality. “How long do you expect ‘and so forth’ to take, Sunlit?”

It was, he had to admit, a valid question. He’d already expended more than three of their hours on this work, leaving less than seven until they reached the highlands. How quickly could he revise and improve this design? How quickly could he experiment enough to find an engine that worked? A master engineer could have done it, undoubtedly.

Here, though, he was lacking. That wasn’t false humility; he’d always been interested in these kinds of things, but he’d chosen the path of a soldier instead. Well, he’d been thrust upon that path, and then he’d chosen to walk it.

Most of what he knew about engineering came from the first few years of his exile, when he’d fallen in with some scholars and really had a chance to learn. Fortunately he had a hope for help. Nearby, the slender woman who was head of repairs and engineering in Beacon had gathered her team, and they were looking over his schematics. He strode over to them, right near the edge of Beacon, with a drop into darkness beyond. He squatted down, and the lead engineer looked at him. Tan skinned with long black hair, she could almost have been Alethi—if not for her strikingly Threnodite name that he’d learned during the fabrication: Solemnity Divine.

“This is genius,” she whispered, hand on the schematics.

“Thanks,” he said. “But I think the boiler housing was too thin.”

Solemnity Divine nodded. “Dirge thinks so too, but I think it’s your seals here and here. But with tweaks, I think it *will* work.”

“The propellant will run out quickly,” another of the engineers warned. “We have three large water tanks for watering crops, but that’s not much to lift the entire city.”

“And if we pare down our ships?” Nomad asked. “Shrink Beacon to only the essential vessels?”

The engineers shared a look.

“Maybe possible,” Solemnity Divine said. “Even with that, I doubt we’d have much flight time. Maybe…two hours? Depending on how low we can get the city’s weight?”

“Long enough?” Nomad asked. “We just have to crest the peaks and start down the other side.”

“Should be,” she said. “Should be. It will be close, anyway…”

“You think you all can improve on this?” he asked, gesturing. “Get it right? There’s not a lot of time.”

“We can try,” she said. She sounded uncertain, but she was already making notes on his schematic.

That’s convenient, the hero notes as he watches them fix Nomad’s terrible first attempt.

“Not convenient,” he said. “Expected. It takes a lot of skill and knowledge to keep a city like this flying; this lot are far more competent than they give themselves credit for. They simply needed a nudge. My design takes them ninety percent of the way there. I had the inspiration; now their expertise can fill in the gaps in my practical knowledge.”

Unlike most of the others, the engineers seemed very interested in the way he occasionally spoke in a foreign tongue. To distract them from that, he leaned in close. “You have work crews, I assume? People who maintain the city?”

“I’ve got a good fifteen people for the task,” Solemnity Divine said. “Why?”

“Because while your top people are working on the engines, I need the others doing something else: making a number of your larger living spaces airtight.”

The five engineers in the huddle frowned, and he realized—for all their experience with flying—they had little understanding of what was going to happen atop those mountains.

“We’re going to a place where the atmosphere gets very thin,” he explained. “Practically nonexistent. No air. No breathing. Fortunately we won’t be there long. Your ships have thick metal hulls, and can probably maintain pressure if we seal them right.”

“We can do that,” she said. “But won’t we suffocate?”

“It’s only for a few hours,” Nomad said. “And we only have to support a hundred and thirty-five people. We’ll pick ten of the largest ships by air volume, divide the people up, and put them inside. We lock those ten ships together, and I’ll fly them. I don’t need to breathe.”

Solemnity Divine blinked. “You…what?”

“I don’t need to breathe,” he said. “Quirk of my heritage. I mean, I *like* breathing. Feels normal, lets me talk. Better to use natural processes to

oxygenate the blood when possible. But I don't strictly need it. And I can take a vacuum without much trouble. Been doing *that* for decades."

Sure enough, several of them muttered about the powers of the Sunlit Man. He doubted their lore actually ascribed such specific powers to the hero—these kinds of legends tended to be vague. Too many places had them. And too many, to his chagrin, had been created—either by intent or accident—by his master. Wit had a habit of…starting conversations.

Regardless, Nomad allowed the engineers their assumptions. Explaining the nature of a highly Invested body, and the ways the Spiritual template and Cognitive perception could maintain a body's status in the face of extreme conditions, seemed like a waste of breath right now.

"I'll get people working on it," Solemnity Divine said. "I don't think this will be a problem, like I said. We'll prepare these new engines as well as ten ships with airtight compartments, then lock the modified ships around the hub bearing the Chorus, and you'll guide it from the main deck. All this, we will do, except… I respectfully venture to request that *you* tell the Greater Good about the necessity of abandoning most of our ships."

He gave her a grim, tight-lipped nod in return. Most of Beacon would have to be left behind. He'd see to it that the city leaders understood.

"Awful trade," he muttered, but nodded to her. He left them with his schematics and trotted back to the others, where the Greater Good were talking with Zeal and several assistants. Rebeke hovered at the perimeter of the conversation, seeming uncertain if she were welcome or not.

They all turned to Nomad as he approached, seeming to brace themselves. They knew too, didn't they?

"We'll have to leave most of Beacon behind," he said. They obviously needed someone to voice it. "The engineers will pick your ten largest ships, by volume of living space, and prepare those. We'll dump everything else."

"To be devoured by the sun," Compassion said, head bowed. "Our grand city of freedom, Elegy's vision…"

"It will be a small miracle to get even part of this city to safety," he said. "You know that. And if we find the Refuge, you'd be abandoning Beacon anyway."

"That doesn't mean," Confidence said, "that doing it won't hurt."

"How are we going to find the opening to the Refuge?" Contemplation asked. "If we bring only the largest of the ships, then we'll be leaving the prospectors behind—meaning no scanning devices."

"Let's bring one prospector, then," Nomad said. "Just in case."

“We can leave the farming equipment behind,” Contemplation said. “The gatherers that harvest metal from the melted fields…”

“We’ll have meeting halls,” Compassion said, “dining rooms, cargo holds, and places of worship. That’s it. If we don’t find the opening, we’re doomed.”

“We were doomed anyway,” Confidence said. “We chose this because it offered a slim chance.” She fixed her eyes on Nomad. “You can find that doorway? Have you figured out how?”

“I will,” he promised. “You’ll have to rely on me to figure something out.”

“We’re relying on you for a lot,” Confidence said, arms folded.

“I wouldn’t want to depend on me so much either,” he agreed. “But your options are all pretty terrible right now. So this is where we are.” He shrugged.

Aren’t you supposed to be good with people? the knight asks. You seem to forget that fairly often.

Well, he was right, so what did it matter? Besides, his gut told him that this frankness was what these people needed. Auxiliary might not have been able to see it, but this *was* being “good” with people. In this situation. It was a stark time for a stern people living on a harsh world. They didn’t want sugar coatings.

They nodded and sent someone to confirm to the engineers that they’d agreed with his plan. He turned to go, but Confidence spoke, stepping toward him.

“Sunlit,” she said. “I want you to know that you are appreciated.”

He paused. He hadn’t expected that. This tall woman with severe features was the one who had been most resistant to his ideas.

“We know,” she said, the other two nodding, “that you were likely offered a deal by the Cinder King. It is his way. He enjoys having power over people and will do whatever is required—even pay them, though he hates it—to achieve that end. You could have thrown in with him. You did not.”

“He broke his oath,” Nomad said.

“Regardless, you have our thanks. Do not mistake my skepticism for hostility. We appreciate you. And if we do manage to crest those mountains and find the Refuge, I will be the first to offer you my warmth in thanks.”

He nodded, and a bit of actual gratitude—real, genuine emotion—cut through his grungy patina of cynicism and exhaustion. It was nice to be appreciated.

“I don’t need that warmth you offer,” he said. “But maybe you could tell me something. Rebeke says there’s a way to give heat to a sunheart, like it was a person?”

“Yes,” Contemplation said. “But this is useless. It barely charges the sunheart at all—a person could give their entire soul to it, and it would only keep a ship in the air for a short time.”

Because they only have one BEU of Investiture, Auxiliary mused. *Yes, interesting.*

“I need to know how anyway,” Nomad said. “For my experiments. I tried it earlier with a sunheart, and nothing happened.”

“Was it a drained sunheart?” Contemplation asked.

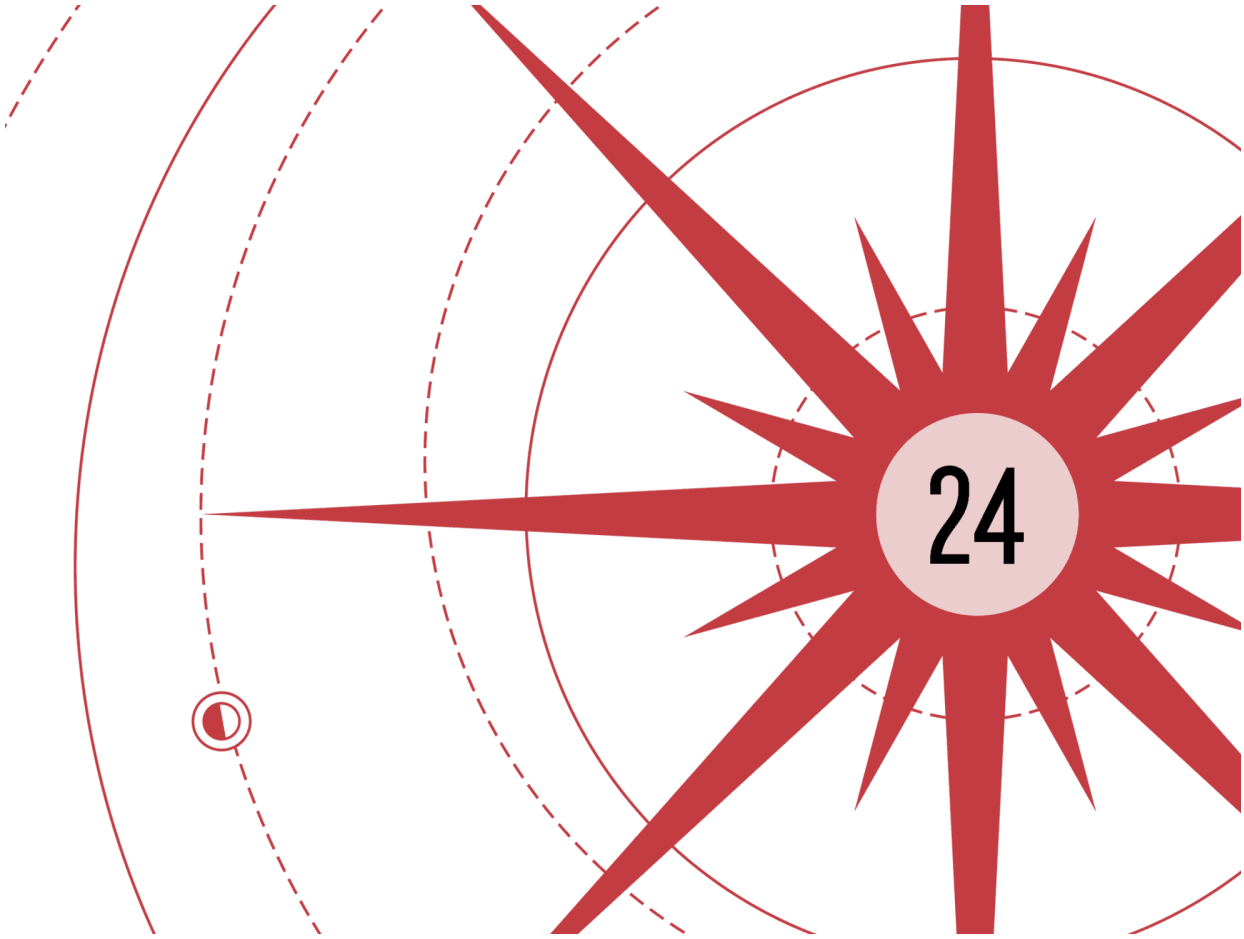
“Well, yes.”

“That won’t work,” she said. “You can’t give your soul to a corpse. You need someone living. Or a—”

“A charged sunheart,” he said, smacking his forehead. “Damnation. Obviously.” There *were* ways to put Investiture into inanimate objects, but it tended to be much harder. And much more dangerous.

Sunhearts were considered *alive* by the reckoning of Investiture. At least, charged ones were. Storms. He was an idiot.

He needed to try again with Elegy.



HE LEFT THEM to divide the people among the chosen buildings while he went to test his realization. They'd harvest the sunhearts of the other ships, then leave the surplus hulks behind. As he'd suggested, they did keep one scout ship with a prospecting device—they picked one where he'd been living, the one that had belonged to Elegy—and the hovercycles.

He rushed away, Rebeke close behind. Before going to his quarters, he asked Rebeke for permission, then stopped beside her hovercycle and pulled out its sunheart.

Hmmm… Aux said. *I'd guess around two hundred BEUs in this one. Far less than what powers a full ship. Still, on a lot of planets, that would be a wealth of Investiture. Enough to reach the Second Heightening, and here it's used for simple locomotion.*

"At a steep cost," Nomad said, heading toward his quarters, Rebeke still trailing behind.

Even on highly Invested worlds, a person's soul isn't more than three BEUs, Aux replied. *You are right about this Investiture coming from somewhere. Keeping this city flying, though it's much smaller than Union, must require sunhearts worth tens of thousands.*

He'd considered that. He considered it again, then continued on his original path. Back at his room, Elegy was still chained to the wall—and yes, that was still uncomfortably strange. Stormfather help him if his master ever found out about this situation. Wit's delight at the potential jokes—most relating to Nomad's methods of getting a woman to stay near him—would be able to power small cities.

Nomad held up the sunheart, which glowed with a simmering deep red light. Yes, it made sense. For the Commands he'd been using, you needed people, or things, with life in them. In essence, he had been trying to command a dead hound to do tricks. This time, he held up the living sunheart to Elegy.

It glowed with the power of the soul that formed it. And when he spoke the words of the prayer Rebeke had taught him, their mother's soul knew what to do. It drew forth some of the life from Elegy in the form of radiant smoke that glowed a luminescent red.

Perfect. Now they were getting somewhere. He grinned, pulling back and digging out another notebook.

"I still don't understand the point of this," Rebeke said as Elegy, as usual, snarled and growled.

"Humor me," Nomad said. "Tell me. There's something different about the sunhearts that make the Charred, right? You all handle these ones without problems—but touch one of those, and they burn away the body and create a monster. Why?"

"We…don't know," Rebeke admitted. "You're right that the Cinder King has access to strange sunhearts with terrible powers—we call them cinderhearts. They glow with a harsher light and consume anyone who touches them. We don't know where he got them, but they are how he rules. First, with the one in his own chest, giving him the ability to feed on thousands of souls. Second, with the ones he uses to make his Charred, who serve him."

There's some Connection going on there, I suspect, Auxiliary said. *Looking at his cinderheart and those of the Charred, his glows even more brightly. And they seem to react to his mental commands. Have you noticed?*

He hadn't, but he trusted Aux, who picked up on things he didn't.

“I still want to know what you’re doing to my sister,” Rebeke said. “And why you’re doing it.”

“I’m learning,” Nomad said, making some notes. “I’ve done nothing harmful to her, just siphoned off a little of her Investiture. But this isn’t enough. Otherwise, those bracers would be enough. Or, storms, having one of you touch her would be enough. I have to get at the core of the soul and remove the residue cankering it…”

“For what?” Rebeke said. “I barely understand what you’re saying, but I do *not* see how this helps us build engines.”

He ignored her. If he was going to figure out how to use this process to remove the Torment from his soul, he needed a stronger transfer. Maybe he needed to press the sunheart into her skin? When the Cinder King created one of his warriors, he jammed the cinderhearts in deep.

He held up the sunheart next to the cinderheart at Elegy’s core and found hers was a darker shade. “Auxiliary,” he said, stepping as close as he dared to examine it. “That’s not anti-Investiture, is it?”

Doesn’t feel like it, Auxiliary said back. *But I’m not the best at spotting that.*

“It seems corrupted—overlaid with some kind of…membrane or coating. Like the skin of a fruit.” He thought for a moment, then said to Rebeke, “It’s important that we both understand that my next action isn’t intended to hurt her in any way.”

“That sounds ominous,” Rebeke said, stepping toward him. “Why do you say it that way?”

“Because I need to believe it,” he said. He held up the glowing sunheart—then touched it to Elegy’s cinderheart and spoke the proper prayer. “Bold one on the threshold of death, give this sunheart your dying heat that it may bless those who still live.”

Elegy started screaming. Rebeke grabbed his arm, trying to pull him away. She threw her entire weight at him, which wasn’t a ton, considering her size. He remained steady, watching the darkness on Elegy’s cinderheart drain away.

Just like, he hoped, the canker on his own soul would. It was *working*. Finally Rebeke grabbed onto his arm and hung there, her entire five-foot-tall frame dragging down on his muscles. That was enough to make him budge, and he was forced to pull back and push Rebeke off.

“I told you,” he snapped, “I wasn’t intending to hurt her!”

“Intent or not,” Rebeke shouted, “that’s what you did! She’s helpless! I want you to remand her to the care of our authorities. I won’t stand for her to be your pawn.”

He stepped toward Elegy again, but Rebeke threw herself between them, frantic. Until, behind her, a new voice spoke.

“Who are you?” Elegy said, throat obviously raw, her words ragged—like from an engine too long without oil. “Let me go.”

Rebeke froze, then spun, gasping. Elegy sneered at them and shook her chained arms, but the motions lacked the wild ferocity of moments earlier. More remarkably, she could speak. He’d never heard one of these Charred speak before. Her cinderheart continued to glow, but now in a purer, vibrant shade. Like magma at the heart of a crater.

“Let me go!” she said, louder.

“Elegy?” Rebeke said, stepping forward, reaching out with gloved fingers.

“Let. Me. GO!”

“Well,” Nomad said, tossing the glowing sunheart onto the table, “that worked.” He began making notes.

“You were trying to cure her?” Rebeke said, spinning back to him. “Why didn’t you *say* that?”

Cure her? Oh right. Well, that was the side effect. He paused, then said, “I didn’t know if it would work, and didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

Storms, the younger woman began to cry. She took him by the arm, then struggled to get her glove off, to press her skin to his in thanks. “You have earned heat today,” she whispered, “and I misjudged you. You are a wonderful, *wonderful* man. Thank you.”

Cute, the knight says. How long has it been since anyone looked at you with true admiration?

Did it matter? He pushed her back firmly. She let him, then looked to Elegy, who watched them with a deep frown.

“Tell me who you are,” Elegy demanded. “And why I’m in these chains. What happened to the voice?”

“The voice?” Nomad asked, stepping forward.

“The one who gives commands,” she said, “in my head. Everything was so clear just a moment ago. Now…now I’m confused. Restore the voice!”

“The Cinder King,” Nomad mused. “As you suspected, he has a way of controlling them. A direct Connection.”

Her soul is terribly compromised, the hero notes. That usually makes it easier to control or infiltrate a mind, doesn’t it?

“It does indeed.” The corrupted sunhearts gave the Cinder King some control over his Charred—but Nomad had removed that control, letting Elegy’s natural personality reemerge.

“It’s her voice,” Rebeke said, “but she doesn’t seem to recognize me. How do we get her to remember?”

Nomad didn’t have a good response. He’d seen cases like this before. Elegy’s memories had almost certainly been burned away by the process that had infected her soul. This wasn’t a case of a little confusion after hitting her head. Her soul had literally been shredded, her mind enslaved.

In his experience, the way forward wouldn’t be to restore her memories, but to help her make new ones. He narrowed his eyes as she rattled the heavy chains, still supernaturally strong.

“The cinderheart’s Investiture remains,” he said. “That comes from the source, not the sludge we drew off. Storms. She can probably feel it in there, driving her.”

A human body, crammed with that much power, would be *electric* with the need to move, to act. One would feel a virtually irresistible urge to use the power, to satisfy its demand to become kinetic. In his case, it drove him to constant motion, to avoid sleep, to push himself to keep running. In Elegy, it was clearly of a more aggressive nature.

The frenzied way these Charred acted, always attacking and enjoying the fight…that might not be the command of the Cinder King. He probably just pointed them in certain directions, kept them working for him, channeling their violent energies.

Nomad took some further notes. How could he apply this to the sludge on his soul? Maybe fashion a knife from the sunheart, then stab himself? That might work, but he feared a Connection problem. These people could all share power, and souls, because of where they were from.

Still, it was the logical next step. He borrowed a knife from Rebeke, who was trying to get Elegy to talk to her. He was able to use it to shave off a piece of the sunheart, something he’d heard them describe. It was less like glass and more like resin. The new fragment continued to glow with the same living light.

He positioned the knife to cut into his own skin. He’d make a small incision on his left arm, then shove the piece of sunheart in. For many uses of Investiture, touching the blood was necessary. Ingesting the piece might have worked, but he wanted to be certain—besides, this would be easier to undo if something went wrong.

Um, Nomad, the knight says, hesitant. This seems kind of stupid.

"And?"

And so maybe don't do it? Choose something not stupid instead?

"I have to try something, Aux," he said. "The Night Brigade could be upon us at any time—and I need to be able to fight if that happens."

Still. Are you certain you want to be this brash?

"What about me makes you think that I'd do anything else?"

The knight gives a long-suffering sigh, but is forced to admit the truth. Nomad is at the very least consistent in his stupidity.

Nomad made a small incision on his forearm. He made a fist and stuck the sliver of sunheart into the wound. He said the prayer, with proper Intent, that had worked on Elegy—then pressed a cloth against the wound to stanch the blood.

Nothing happened. He said the words again, trying to maintain the proper frame of mind. He also said them a little differently several times, using variations of oaths from his homeworld, then other Investiture-transferring incantations he'd learned.

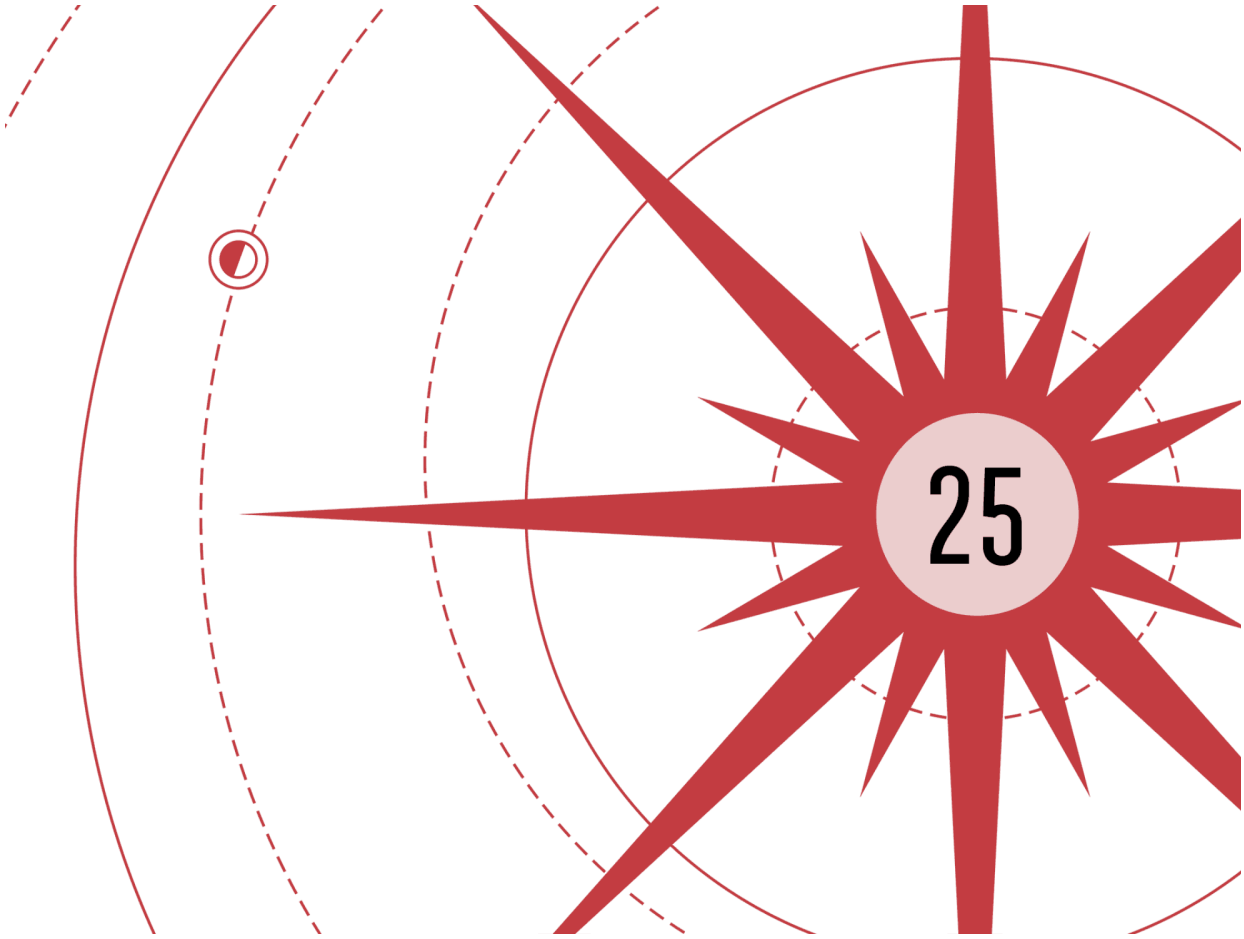
None seemed to do anything. Sharing Investiture was much more difficult when you didn't have Connections to the power or the people who'd created it. Perhaps that was the problem here. Or maybe it *was* working, but he just couldn't feel any—

Click.

He looked up with a sharp intake of breath to see Rebeke undoing the manacles on her sister's feet. The ones on her arms already dangled free.

Damnation.

Elegy met his eyes, then leaped at him with a howl of determined anger.



REBEKE SCREAMED AS the Charred shoved aside the table and went for Nomad's throat. He got his own hands up, grabbing her wrists before her nails dug into his flesh, but her momentum took them both to the floor in a writhing heap.

He grunted, rolling them to the side, trying to get the upper hand. This *should* have been easy. He'd trained extensively in grappling over the years, while she fought with an unskilled frenzy, eyes wide and teeth clenched. But every time he got close to putting her into a secure hold, she shoved free, breaking his grip with a burst of raw strength.

He found himself struggling to keep control. She moved in unexpected ways, kneeing him, biting at him as they rolled. He finally tried to cuff her across the face to stun her, but that direct an attack made his body freeze, and he involuntarily let her go.

Her movements a blur, she grabbed the sides of his head, then slammed his skull against the steel floor, making him see stars. Luckily his dazed state

was quickly remedied by his healing, and he managed to seize her hands again, acting more by touch than sight.

Elegy was so focused on beating him senseless, she didn't notice as he summoned Auxiliary as cuffs and a chain and snapped them into place. When Rebeke—belatedly—tried to stop her sister, the distraction gave him a chance to roll away and lock Elegy back to the wall. As Elegy started toward him again, he had Auxiliary shorten the chain, then he scrambled out of range of her grasp at last.

Then he lay on the ground, groaning, his vision swimming.

Just over eight percent Skip capacity remaining, Auxiliary whispered as his vision and head healed. A part of Nomad hated hearing the notations like that. He hated feeling like a machine with a power source. Life had felt so much more…vibrant when he'd just drawn in power and sensed a general impression of what he had left.

He sat up, his back against the wall. Rebeke knelt next to him, looking horrified. Her sister wasn't completely locked back in place. Instead of being manacled both hand and foot to the wall, she was just locked there by her wrists, with almost two feet of slack.

She wasn't using it, but instead crouched on her toes, like a feral beast, glaring and growling at him.

"I'm sorry," Rebeke whispered. "I thought… She seemed to be recovering, and I thought…I…"

"Yeah," Nomad said. "Well, next time you do something that insane, could you at least give me a heads-up so I can start running?"

You all right? Auxiliary asked. Voice flat as ever, but the way he asked it —without pretense or affectation—implied real concern.

Nomad rubbed his head. "Yeah," he muttered. "I think."

"Elegy," Rebeke said, standing. "Why did you *do* that?"

"You have me chained," the Charred hissed.

"We were *unchaining* you!" Rebeke said.

"I fight," Elegy said simply. "It's what I do."

"I'm your sister!" Rebeke said. "This man helped me save you from our enemies. You are *home*. You don't need to fight any longer."

Elegy didn't respond, so Rebeke spun on Nomad. "She's not fully cured! Do what you did before, only more."

"Won't help," he said. "Any more of that might kill her. I've drawn off the part that was letting the Cinder King control her; what you see now is everything left of your sister."

Nomad moved over to his desk and cut out the sliver of sunheart in his arm, which had healed over, then wiped off the blood with a rag. He was even more frustrated than before, though. He'd locked up during the fighting—proof that the process hadn't worked on him as it had on Elegy.

So what could he do? Was there a path forward?

Rebeke was standing by the wall, softly crying. Best to give her something to do, so he asked her to fetch Zeal, who had the controls to activate the bracers that Elegy still wore. That would freeze her and let them lock her up fully again.

As Rebeke ran off, he took a few deep breaths. Then, wanting to keep moving, he began sketching out a new set of schematics. He found that if he rapidly jumped between his problems, he worked better. A little here, a little there, always trying to make progress on *something*. In this case, he came up with some ideas to deal with the Cinder King's forces after cresting the mountain.

"Is she really my sister?" Elegy asked from behind, interrupting him.

He glanced toward her. She'd settled into a seated position, hands bound by the chains over her head. She seemed…tired. Exhausted. He knew that feeling.

"Yes," he said. "You had a brother too. He died rescuing you."

"From what?"

"That voice in your head?" Nomad said, making a few more notes. "That's the Cinder King. He took you, put that cinderheart in your chest, and burned away your previous life."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Maybe you want to control me."

"You already let that voice do that," he said. "So why care if we control you or not? Why care if we're lying or not?"

She fell silent, letting him work a little longer.

"I don't belong here," Elegy finally said. "I can feel that is true. That other one, she expects something from me. But I'm not that person she sees when she looks at me."

"What person are you?"

"One on fire," Elegy said softly. "Burning with the fight. I…can't explain."

"Your entire body feels alert, tense, on the edge of panic. Something inside of you rages, like a storm, pushing you into motion. To action. Sitting

still is agony. You need to move, to fight, to be running or struggling in some way."

"…Yes."

He looked up from his notes, meeting her eyes. "You're right," he said. "You aren't the person she thinks you are. You probably can't ever be that person again. You're going to have to find a new way, both of you."

"Let me free."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Will you attack me again?"

"Probably," she admitted. "But you feel it too. You described it. We could fight. You and I. Struggle. Move. Be alive."

"Not interested. Thanks."

She's charming, the knight says.

Rebeke soon returned with Zeal in tow. Using his device, they knocked Elegy unconscious and reset her chains. Zeal watched with curiosity as Nomad dismissed Auxiliary.

"How," he asked, "do you control that shade? Shouldn't it try to kill you?"

"Auxiliary," he replied, "is a little different from your shades. He doesn't attack with glowing eyes or a deadly touch. He uses sarcasm instead, and it's far more painful."

Excuse me, the hero interjects with a voice not the least bit sarcastic. I state facts. How you take them is purely up to you.

Zeal nodded to Elegy. "You sure you don't want me to take her back to the prison?"

"He's helping her," Rebeke explained. "Zeal, she *spoke* to us, like I told you."

"Never heard a Charred do that before," Zeal admitted. "Well, all right. I guess I'll leave this here." He set the control device on the desk.

"Appreciate it," Nomad said.

"What's that?" Zeal asked, nodding to his notes. He leaned in closer. "Guns? On the ships?" He whistled softly, picking out the scale.

Nomad nodded. "I've got a little more experience with weapons than I do with boilers."

"Do they need to be that *big*?" Rebeke said.

"We've picked the biggest, bulkiest ships to ascend over the mountains," Nomad explained. "It's what we need to carry all your people. But it means that once we emerge from the darkness and try to open the way to the Refuge, we're going to be easy prey for the Cinder King."

"Unless…" Zeal said.

“Unless we bring some serious firepower,” Nomad said. “And hit him with something he’s never seen before.” He sat back, holding up his notebook. “If your ancestors really can fabricate anything, given raw materials and schematics, then I see no reason not to go big. These should work with sunhearts as power.” He closed the notebook. “But they’re irrelevant for now. Unless we get over those mountains, nothing else is going to matter.”

“What are our chances of doing that?” Zeal asked. “If you had to guess?”

“No idea,” Nomad said. “But better than zero, which is what we’ll have if we stop moving.”

Further discussion was interrupted by a sound echoing through the city. A horn being blown. That was unusual, since the Beaconites typically tried to keep the flying town as silent and invisible as they could.

He looked to the other two for explanation.

“Call to gather,” Zeal said, reading the horns, which were bleating out a pattern. “The people have been warned already to gather essential clothing and items in one bag each and leave the rest. This is the final warning. We’re going to start dumping the other ships to conserve power.”

“Already?” Nomad said. “Your people move quickly.”

As soon as he said it, he knew he’d opened himself up for—

Gosh, you think? The knight gives a pointed roll of his eyes—the ones he’d totally have if Nomad hadn’t killed him. They move fast? Really? The people who spend their lives outracing the sun, always one step from being vaporized in a wave of burning light? They move fast?

Well, damn. Who would have thought?

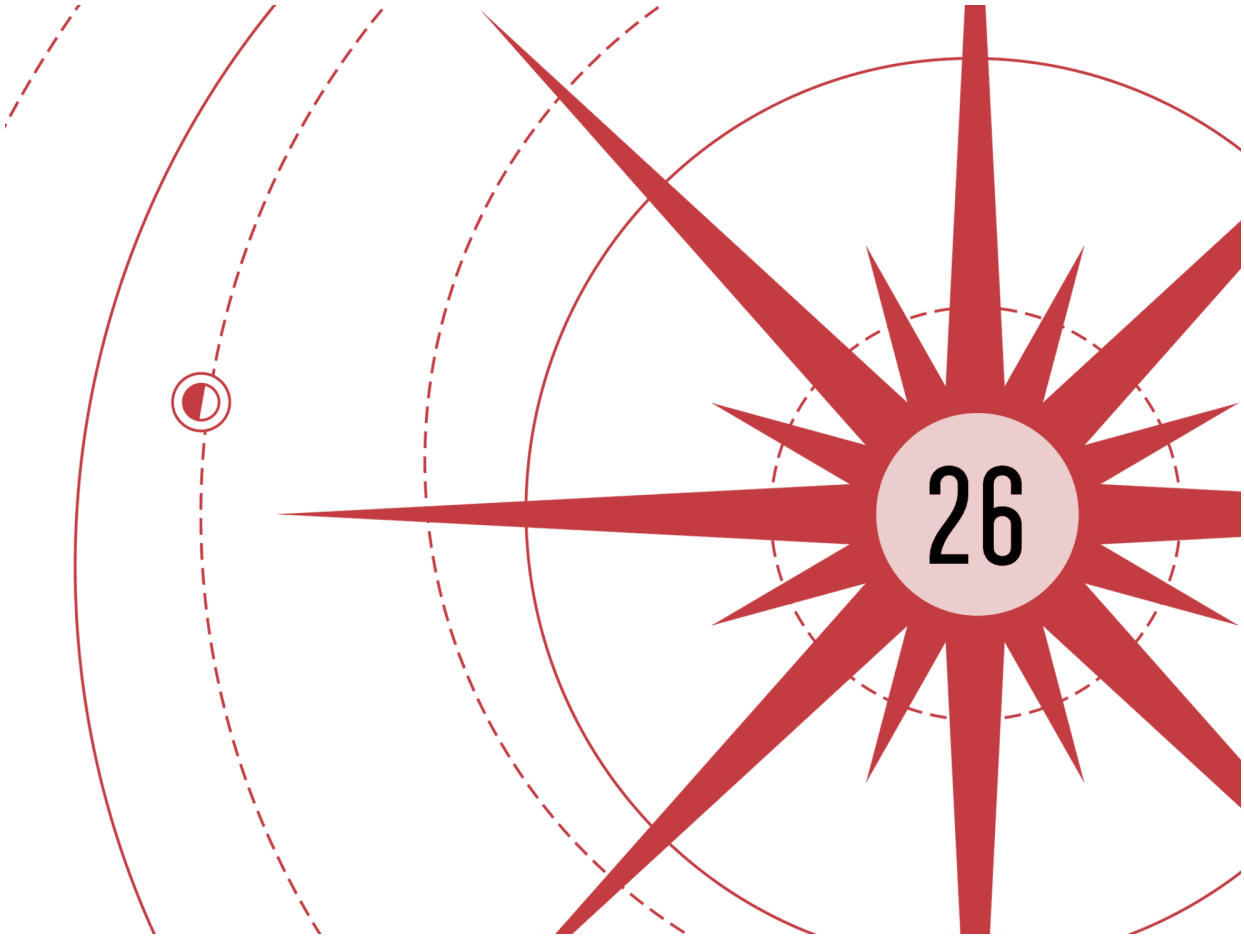
“You really don’t think that’s sarcasm?” Nomad said in Alethi.

It’s just being extra clear.

“I think maybe you go a little far.”

Well, you don’t have a valet who likes to stab himself with bits of unknown power sources for fun. You’ve got to be very deliberate with that sort of person, you know.

Nomad grunted, sliding his notebook into his coat pocket. “Come on,” he said to Rebeke. “I want to check on the engineers and watch their new version explode.”



IT TURNED OUT that Beacon's little engineering team was packed with overachievers. They hadn't made one new prototype, but three, each using parts of his design to modify a small engine.

Only two of these exploded. The third went soaring up into the air, visible only by its blinking light in the darkness—which let some people on a quadcycle with nets zip out and catch it once it fell.

The ascent left the crowd in awe. Most of the people of Beacon had gathered here to watch as they were being evacuated from their homes to the larger central ships.

"It ascended so high," one of them said. "Far past where a ship can normally go…"

"This might work," another said. "It actually *might work*!"

You are so lucky, the hero says, that one of them flew.

"Agreed," Nomad whispered. If all three of those tests had exploded, he might be facing a riot.

The engineers gathered around him as the engine was retrieved. They looked up at him like children, anticipating praise. Storms, he always felt awkward in this sort of situation. Still, he'd been trained in the right words to say. "Excellent job. You just saved this city." He nodded toward the engine. "Flew higher and faster than you thought, eh?"

"It was supposed to hover," Solemnity Divine said. "That's what your design said, at least. It's working *too* well, rocketing into the sky. We'll do another design run on that. But there's one other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

She pointed to several large ships near the center of the city, each dominated by a cylindrical structure three stories high. The water towers. They were like the enclosure for the Chorus, but more industrial. People were being moved into the other ships that had been chosen for the ascent, including the central hub. But not these three.

"Those should contain just enough to get us up the mountains and then let us control our descent," she said. "We'll put them at the edges of the city, uninhabited, and let you be ready to drop those entire ships off once they are empty. But we were hoping for some help on how to insulate and heat them. Against the cold, you know? We'll crash quickly if our propellant freezes once we get past atmosphere."

"You don't know a lot about space or vacuums, do you?" he guessed.

"Uh, shades, no," she said. "Why would we?"

"You don't need to insulate against the cold," he said. "Though do install some heat sinks—particularly on the piping near the engines. We *should* be fine, as we'll be dumping heat prodigiously. That's kind of the point of all this. But I would still worry about those pipes."

"Heat," she said flatly. "You're worried about too much heat? Up that high?"

"Trust me," he said. "If we enter a true vacuum—which we might not actually do—the only way to lose heat is through ejection of matter or through infrared radiation, which is *extremely* slow. There's no convection. No air to conduct heat away. I suggest some fins, if you have time, exposed as much as you can and ready to radiate heat. But my guess is it won't be relevant."

She nodded, taking his word on it, and went off with the others to begin creating new designs. As he stood, watching the people be sorted into the ships, he was surprised to see a break in the clouds above—that was supposedly rare on this side of the sunrise—which let the city pass into the

light of the rings again. They illuminated a landscape of jagged and craggy highlands. Rainwater ran down the rugged stone hills in a thousand little waterfalls.

That's a sight, the knight says with awe. Just water and stones, but on such a scale as to be beautiful. Amazing. Why is it we hate traveling these worlds again?

"Because we're being hunted?"

Right, of course, yes. But…I do wish we could pause a little more often and just enjoy the view.

Enjoying views was for someone who didn't have a gun to his head.

Off to his right, one of the ships broke away from the main bulk of the city and fell off, smashing to the ground below and interrupting the waterfalls. A work crew moved on, having recovered the sunheart from that ship. They entered the next one in the outer ring, and soon it detached and dropped off as well. Then a third. They were inanimate masses of metal, yet in this situation they seemed somehow forlorn, even tragic. Gravestones for the city that was no more.

As he watched, he was joined by Contemplation, walking with a cane—her hair wet, despite the protection of a wide-brimmed hat that had been pinned to it. Surprisingly she *shaded* her eyes against the light of the rings. As if even that dim light bothered her.

"We are getting uncomfortably close to those mountains, Sunlit," she said. "At least that engine of yours seems to be working."

"We should still do a test run," he said. "When we're closer to the peaks, we should take one ship out and let it fly up high to confirm that the engine works as intended."

"We could, perhaps, use the one assigned to you." She nodded to the side, where he could pick out his home on Beacon—a ship with only a few small rooms in it, a wide deck, and a bulbous cab near the back. "It was Elegy's ship, named the *Dawnchaser*. She had it reinforced, so she could try to push into the great maelstrom at the edge of night, drawing ever closer to the sun."

"Why would she want that?"

"It was one of her ideas for survival," Contemplation said. "The Cinder King leaves people to die in the sunlight, then keeps a force of ships patrolling the edge of the great maelstrom—ready to snatch those sunhearts from the ground the moment it is safe to do so. Elegy wondered if there was some way to travel the great maelstrom itself—that boundary between the

rain and the sunlight—and get them before the Cinder King could." She shook her head. "It proved impossible. Even if we could make a ship survive long enough, there was no way to leave the ship and recover the sunhearts."

"The more I hear about Elegy," he noted, "the more I like her."

"Because of failed ideas?"

"Failed ideas lead to successful ones, Contemplation. They're the only thing that does."

She nodded, thoughtful, looking along the slopes, toward that great maelstrom. A place not in the sunlight, but dealing with the effects of its passing. He still hadn't figured out the mechanics of this place. Why that tempest didn't lead to planetwide unlivable weather patterns. Why the sunlight even burned on the level it did in the first place.

"Elegy always did seek the light," Contemplation said. "Then one day the Cinder King rammed it right into her chest…"

Yet another ship collapsed, joining the trail of broken heaps they left behind.

"You know," he said, "in my homeland, we have a story about someone who got too close to the sun. It's a common enough theme across cultures and worlds. It never ends well."

"If it pleases you to reassure me," Contemplation said, hands on her cane, "then you are failing. Since that's essentially what we're going to be doing in a few short hours. But…what is this story you reference?"

He hesitated.

Go on, the knight whispers, it's all right. I want to hear it. Give in a little.

"They came from the east," Nomad said in the local tongue so Contemplation could understand. "Giants, in armor forged of the deepest metals. A horde of death and destruction that ate the land, consumed villages like insects swarming the crops. Ripping. Smashing.

"My ancestors fought them, because what else could you do? Submit to a force that only wanted to devour you and the civilization you stood for? We waited in ranks, each of us smaller than the invaders, but strong as a whole. Walls of honor and training, the only possible way to stem that tide of destruction. They called themselves the Alethi, but we knew them as the Tagarut. The breakers, it means. Those who leave only death.

"It was during the fourth invasion of our Ulutu Dynasty, the dates so old that no scholars can agree on them, but it is generally thought to have happened during the days of our fifteenth emperor. The Tagarut came again,

as they were like the storm itself. Regular. Every generation. Another warlord. Another invasion."

"Giants, you say?" Contemplation said, looking up at him. "Compared to *you*?"

"Yes," he whispered as another part of the city fell. "I've stood among them. Called some friends. They stand closer to the sky than any people I've ever known, Contemplation."

"How do you befriend something so terrible?"

He smiled. "Legend says a change happened during that final invasion of the Ulutu Dynasty. The breakers—tired of falling to our armies—decided to try a new tactic. They decided to conquer the sun.

"'What a lofty place,' they thought. 'It must glow with riches to shine so brightly.' The Tagarut found the highest mountain and began to build scaffolding. They brought their greatest war machines, their towers for taking cities, their ropes, and their Shardbearers. And they climbed up to the sun itself, intent on destroying whatever people lived there, despoiling their land."

"They climbed *to* the sun. So it's a fanciful story." She sounded disappointed.

"Truth and fancy intermingle in almost all stories, Contemplation," he said. "Especially the old ones. You cannot abandon fancy without gutting the truth. But in this story, yes, the central idea is fancy—for they reached the sun, eager to find weapons and tools they could use to finally claim my homeland.

"But the sunlight was too bright. The riches of the vault of the Almighty itself glowed with an intense heat. The Tagarut could not carry the gemstones they found, for they shone so bright as to destroy a man. The proud giants, the terrible warriors, were forced to flee—beaten not by spears or shields, but by the very treasure they sought to claim.

"From that day it was said that their eyes had been bleached by the intense light, like clay cooked too long. Instead of normal dark browns, many Alethi have watery blue or other light eyes. The brilliance of the heavens—where Yaezir himself sits upon his throne—had destroyed their ability to see as common people do. Though they now saw the world washed-out, the gleam of treasure also faded because of this.

"After their loss, the Tagarut began to act like people. No longer lusting only for treasure, they learned to *speak*. Never to write, but still, a measure of civilization came to them. And that is why, to this day, the eyes of their

leaders are light-colored. And why you can finally have a conversation with one—instead of only running for your life."

He looked to Contemplation and found her smiling. She stared forward, watching her city fall to pieces, an ideal abandoned like so many needed to be. "I had not expected to find a storyteller in you, Sunlit."

"I had not expected to become one."

"If it pleases you to say, is that the end? Where is the moral?"

"There is none. It's just a whimsical story."

"Curious. Our stories are never like that. There's always some message. Usually rather heavy-handed, if my bluntness is not too shocking. For some reason, many involve children who get eaten by shades."

"My master likes those kinds of stories," Nomad said. "The kinds with points. It's gotten so he lies and tells people there isn't a point to anything he says, all to keep them from drifting off and ignoring him for preaching to them. But I've found I prefer the ones that are just…stories. No point other than to be interesting."

Contemplation nodded as the building he'd met her in, the one that had been her home here on Beacon, broke away and fell off. "I should like," she whispered, "to live my remaining days in a place where we could afford to tell such stories. A place with no running. A place of peace and…whimsy."

"I understand," he said.

Contemplation and Nomad were forced to retreat from their edge of the city as those ships were dropped off next. They mingled with the many people who stood closer to the center, watching their city be dissected—pieces cut free, like fingers removed to save the arm from gangrene.

Next to him, a child holding her mother's hand pointed at the sky. "Look, Mommy. A new star."

"How would you know, Deborah-James?" her mother asked.

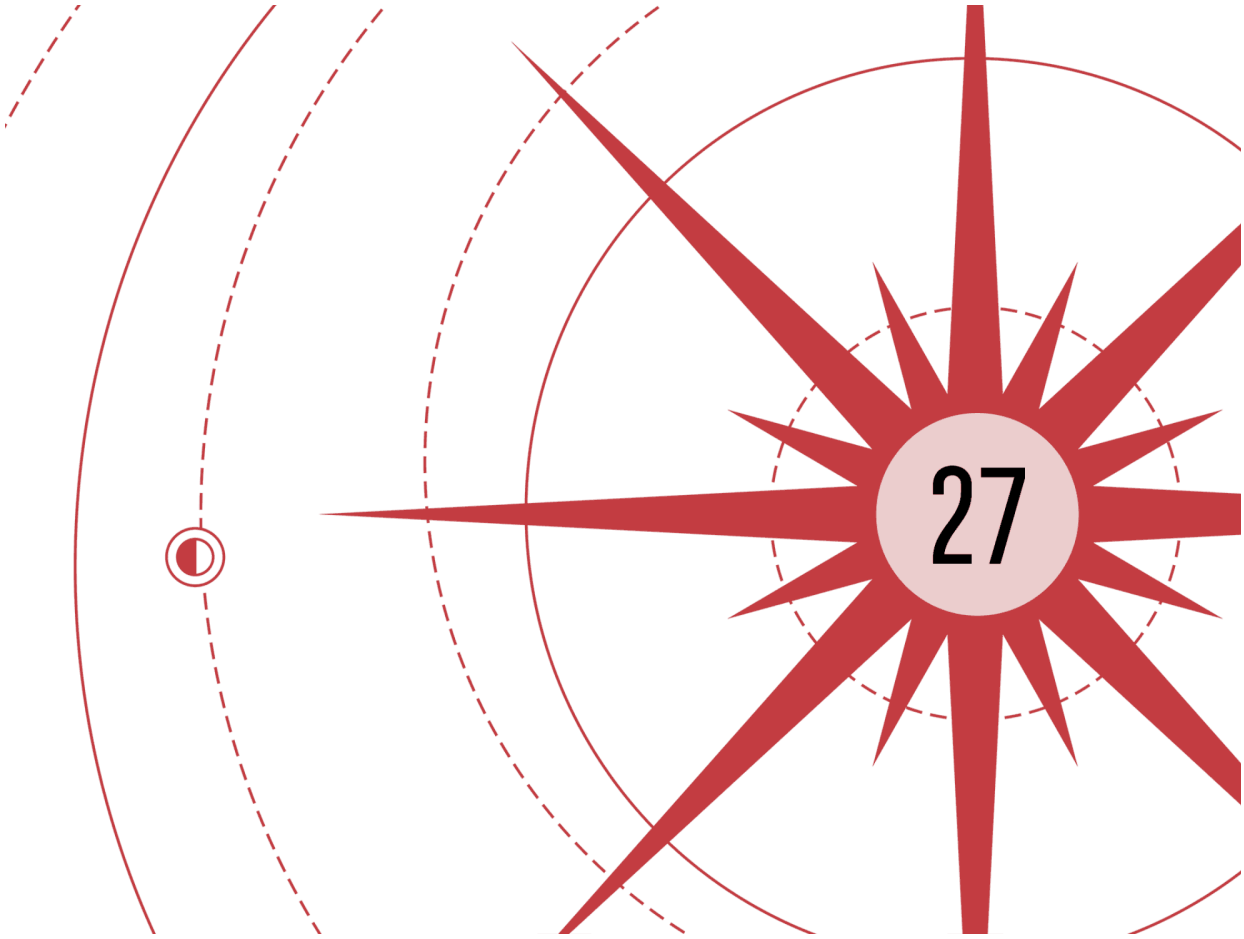
"We study the stars in school," the girl replied. "So we can know where we are. Look, it's new."

Nomad froze, then turned and searched the sky. He found it almost immediately, up and to the right, near the rings. Glowing brightly in reflected sunlight.

Well, storms, the knight whispers. Party is over.

"Huh," Contemplation said, following his gaze. "It *is* a new star. Or…a new part of the ring, maybe? A good sign. A sign, maybe, that Adonalsium blesses our journey?"

“Yeah, no,” Nomad said. “That’s not a new star or an asteroid, Contemplation. That’s a massive warship in low orbit around the planet. They’re called the Night Brigade. Distant cousins of yours, actually. They’re here to kill me.”



"THEY HAVE A SHIP," Contemplation said, "for traveling the stars?" She turned to him and finally seemed to see him for who he was.

"Yes," he said. "Those ships are getting more and more common these days."

"Then perchance…perchance we could ask them for help against the Cinder King? Or we could get passage on their ship or… You're looking at me with an expression that says I've said something insane."

"The Night Brigade commands armies of the dead," he said. "They're largely a mercenary force, known for their brutal efficiency. They're the only army I know that makes you keep on fighting after you've died. They are *not* sympathetic to the problems of local people. To put it mildly."

"Very well," she said. "Then what do we do?"

"Get back under cloud cover," he said, striding toward the hub of Beacon. "Run dark, as you're so good at doing. They won't know immediately where

to find me and will need time to survey the planet. I hoped it would take them longer to follow me to this system, but we've still got time."

"Fine," Contemplation said, barely keeping up. "But let me offer this reminder: you recognize the limited nature of that very time, correct? We are approaching the mountains at a frightening rate."

"We're close to being on schedule," he said. "Two more hours for fabrication and installation."

"An incredible pace."

"But doable," he said, "now that we have a working engine prototype. We don't need to swap out most of your equipment; I designed this to work with the ship structures you have. The hardest part is getting the boilers in place, but those are the simplest parts to fabricate—and should go quickly."

"Another hour or two up the slope," Contemplation continued.

"Again, doable," Nomad said.

"Yes, but the higher you go, the closer to sunrise you get us. And the more likely we are to be killed by it." She pointed at the horizon. "At this point, we flirt with getting so high, we no longer have the shadow of the planet's protection."

It was true. But it *should* work. If they kept the timeline. If nothing went wrong.

He ignored the part of him that whispered that something *always* went wrong.

He found the engineers—who had set up under a tent on the deck, as all the buildings were either being jettisoned or filled with people.

"Time is tight," Nomad said to them. "We need to start fabricating the boilers."

"We aren't ready," Solemnity Divine said. "We need another iteration."

"Not enough time," he said. "Instead of a new engine, we just modify the one we know works."

He summoned Auxiliary as a rough model of a ship, then turned it over on the bottom. His modifications put a boiler near the engine, hanging off the bottom of the ship. It was the only way to install one quickly, since the tops of these ships were living spaces and they didn't have time to cut through.

The water towers were on the tops of the vessels, so his design ran large water lines down to the boilers, which superheated the water using sunhearts, then injected it into the engine proper. That, modified by his schematics, spit the steam and heat out the bottom and generated thrust. Not

the most efficient engine ever, but the concentrated power source made it viable.

"Look," he said, pointing at the water line. "Just put an inhibitor right here. Less water in means less water out, and therefore less thrust. Make this inhibitor variable and wire it into the ship controls, so we can increase or decrease thrust at will."

Solemnity Divine looked at his design, then smacked her forehead. "Right. Of course. Such an easy fix."

It was a time-tested adage in engineering. Why redesign when you could patch the old model? That led to short-term fixes, but that was all they needed.

"We must do more tests," another engineer said. "A stress test at least! We don't know if this design will last longer than a five-minute burn!"

"Install this all on my hovercycle. I'll take it up the mountain, perform a stress test, and make sure it works. While I'm gone, you get these modifications installed on the remaining ships. Don't forget lateral thrusting ability—we'll need to be able to go forward, not just up."

He left them in a buzz and stepped back over to Contemplation, who watched the sky and that blazing light of a warship. He wondered how much load it put on their shields to withstand the power of that sunlight. It seemed like what he'd felt should overwhelm most shields. Again, his mind itched with the worry that something wasn't adding up.

"How dangerous are they?" she asked.

"I know of no force more dangerous. They have been known to leave entire planets desolate. Fortunately the Night Brigade aren't mindless pillagers. They're a precision force and will do whatever their contract—or in this case, their goal—demands."

"Then…they could destroy us all."

"If they wished," Nomad said. "Thing is, though…destroying a planet? That takes *work*, Contemplation. Work they're not getting paid for. They should leave you mostly alone." He paused, then glanced toward the hub. "Hopefully they won't want your shades. They have a thing for ghosts."

She looked to him, pale, worried. "What kind of mercenary force," she said, "can control shades well enough to use them as soldiers?"

"If they get close, I'll leave," he said. "You'll be better for it. Tell the Night Brigade everything—all about me, everything they ask you to tell them. Don't try to hide anything. Playing dumb won't drive them away. Comply with everything they ask you to do; make it easier for them to leave

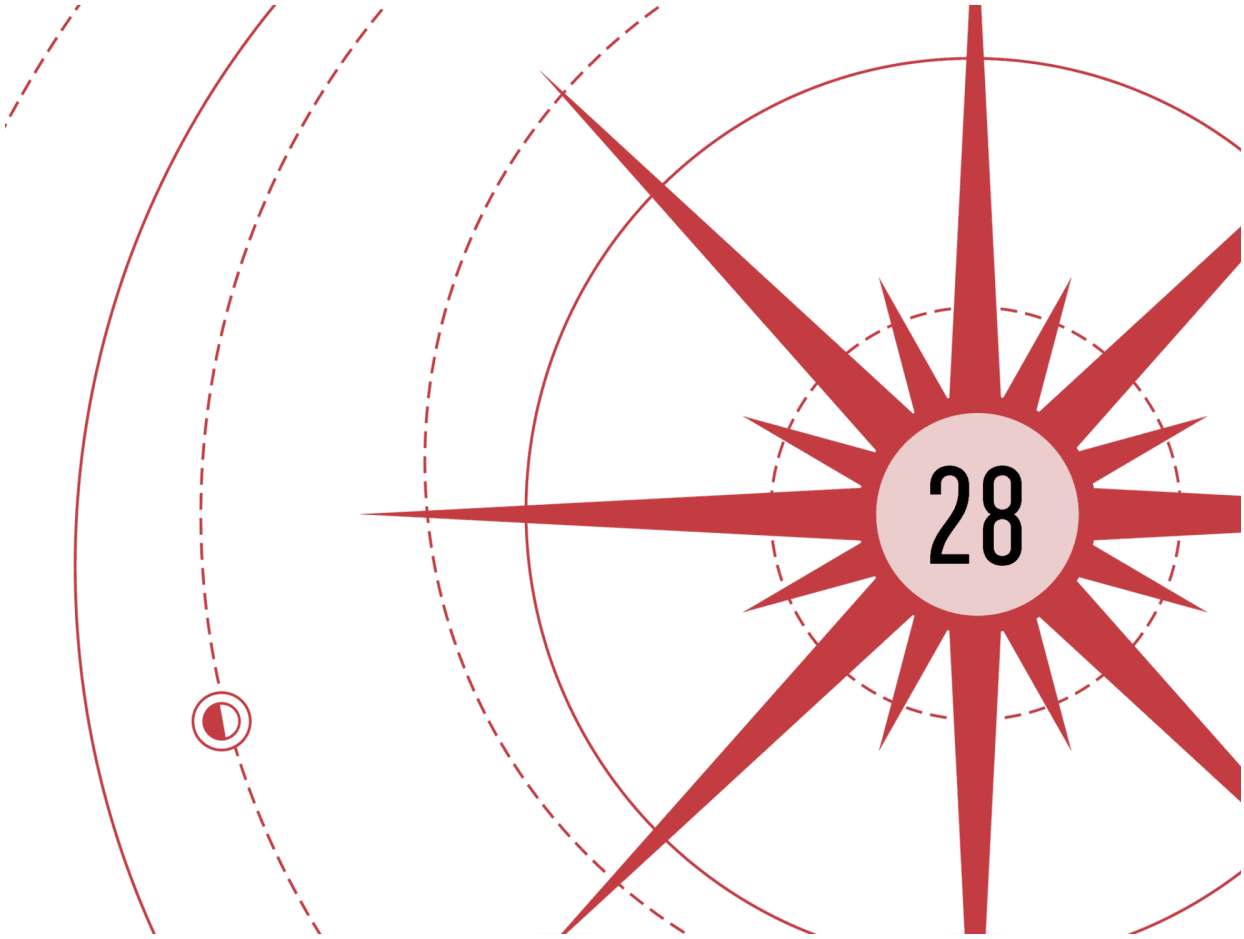
you alive than kill you. It's the only way to escape from them with your limbs—and soul—still attached."

She nodded. "I will tell the others. Adonalsium—or whatever god you follow—bless your flight, Sunlit."

"I'll settle," he said, "for no gods intentionally thwarting me for once."

She seemed troubled by that statement—as well she should.

He worked frantically with the engineers. And a short time later, on the back of a small, battery-powered hovercycle, he raced into the shadows.



POWERFUL FLOODLIGHTS ON the front of the cycle let him see where he was going. A barren rocky mountainside, pocked by holes where trapped gases had blown out. The surfaces were smooth, even glassy, but the jagged edges were unweathered and razor sharp.

As he flew upward, he realized that this was the first time on this planet he'd been truly alone. Even when he'd worked on the schematics, Elegy had been in the room. Now it was just him, Auxiliary, and the darkness. Shaded from the sunlight by a shield that was—by definition—on a planetary scale. He pushed the cycle up the slope and soon encountered snow. His body's protections had already started to come into play, warming him from within, so he didn't notice the air temperature. The snow was his first sign that they were getting to dangerously high elevations.

So, the knight says, is this a good time to ask you what we're going to do if this works? How do we find the hidden Refuge? We spent the better part of a

day searching earlier, and that was when the Cinder King didn't know what we were up to. It's going to be far more difficult this time.

"Perhaps," Nomad said, his breath misting. "Perhaps not. Cities keep to relatively strict latitudes here. I confirmed it with their navigation team. The Cinder King flies Union around the planet in a straight line."

Okay, so?

"So that greatly narrows down the area we have to search," Nomad said.

Sorry, my dutiful valet, the knight intones. I still don't follow your scattered logic. Is the elevation getting to you?

"Right, let me explain it this way," Nomad said, swerving around a large rock formation. "The Cinder King made no regular excursions—he wasn't flying out somewhere to study the entrance. Someone would have noticed if, each rotation, he mysteriously left the city.

"Yet we know that the Cinder King has been trying to get into the Refuge for years. Everyone agrees it was an obsession of his, and some few have even seen the door. So he had to study it in the normal course of their journey, during one of their regular stops to grow crops.

"Since Union always flies in a straight line around the planet, the entrance is somewhere in that specific latitude. In the direct path of the city. A place he can periodically land and study with his closest and most trusted officials, while everyone else grows food."

Right, then. So…that's still a huge area. Somewhere on a long line rounding the planet? It's a small planet, yes, but that's too much ground to search while being chased. We need to know where on that line the entrance can be found.

"Actually we don't need to know that," he said. "Not right now. Because the Cinder King knows it."

Alas, the knight thinks, my sleep-deprived squire has finally lost his mind and is speaking complete gibberish.

"Trust me on this one," Nomad said. "Finding the Refuge isn't going to be difficult. Neither is opening it. Those will be two of the easiest parts of our task."

Then what is the hard part?

Nomad didn't reply. He leaned down over his cycle, checking the time. By everyone's best guesses, he should be over halfway up his climb. Indeed, his speed was decreasing as the conventional engine slowly lost the ability to propel him. He left a melted trail behind him in the ice as he dipped lower,

but he waited to engage the new engine. He needed to get as far as he could with the regular one to conserve propellant for the new one.

So…let's assume we get over the mountain, the knight muses. We somehow don't run Beacon out of energy. You work whatever magic you're planning, and we locate the door and get it open. What then?

What happens when Rebeke and the rest discover that the gate the Cinder King has been trying to open doesn't lead to some mythical, idyllic cavern and utopia of sun-free living? What happens when instead they discover it leads to some small, offworlder research facility?

"Congratulations. You've identified the hard part."

Ah. Right.

"I said I'd get Beacon's leadership through that door," he said. "*That* was my oath. I never said I'd solve their problem with the Cinder King or their bigger problem—the sad fact that it's unlikely their planet has *any* true refuge from the sun. I warned them. They're committed anyway. So it's not my problem."

That doesn't make you sad?

"I can't help everyone. I can barely deal with my own issues. I just have to keep moving forward."

Yes, but…isn't there another way? More we can do?

Once, instead of questions, Auxiliary would have given him a lecture. They'd both been through a lot since those days. Nomad sensed no condemnation in those words. Just sorrow.

He made no response, because the air was well and truly giving out now, and he doubted he could fill his lungs sufficiently. Instead he exhaled and let his body do what it did, protecting him with a little bubble of invisible pressure, a leftover from his old powers. He'd use up Investiture, but this wasn't a major drain.

Beneath him, the engine labored, but the cycle barely stayed in the air—and his progress up the slope had slowed to a crawl. So he engaged the new engine—really just a complement to the old system.

It worked perfectly, shooting down a jet of superheated steam and lifting him a good ten feet higher above the frozen landscape. He'd gotten above the perpetual cloud cover here, so he could finally see the stars. He took a moment to admire the rings—which, unless he was remembering wrong, were another oddity. The few other planets he'd visited with rings always had them at the equator, but not these. Strange rings, strange gravity, strange sunlight. What a bizarre planet.

Unfortunately, the rings reminded him of the ship up there, newly arrived. No. He couldn't think about how close the Night Brigade was right now. He focused instead on the path.

His eyes adjusted, and he dimmed the floodlight. The snow had fallen away also—not enough atmosphere. Now it was just him and the grey stone, like a ramp up toward the cosmere itself. These scattered peaks weren't high, around a thousand feet, despite their steep incline. But just because this peak was relatively low didn't mean it wasn't worth climbing, and he still felt proud as he neared the top.

He cut the engine at the summit, settling down gently. His feet were silent as they touched the stone. There was no appreciable atmosphere here to carry the sound waves. He enjoyed the moment, parked at the very top of the world, surveying the curvature of the small planet and looking out over the smoldering clouds. The sun was still a ways off, not even illuminating the horizon.

Higher mountains rose to either side of him. He couldn't spot a lower pass the city could sneak through. The fugitives would have to come all the way up this slope. On the back side, the slope was even steeper—cutting downward in a way that would have been improbable in a normal mountain range. Weathering below would not have needed long to collapse this higher section. But here, the peaks only had to last a day until they were remade.

He turned toward the stars again. They'd always seemed so friendly to him. So full of stories. How many of those stars had he visited now? Just a fraction of them, and yet the cosmere had begun to feel like a small place. Instinctively he tried to find Taln's Scar, but the patch of red wasn't visible from this angle.

Do you remember, the knight asks, when you first realized the Night Brigade was chasing you?

Nomad sent annoyance through the bond.

Ah, that's right, the hero realizes. You can't speak up here. How special… how delightful. I can talk, and you can't interrupt? You know, for a lowly valet, you certainly do monopolize a great deal of the speaking opportunities.

More annoyance. So much annoyance.

Lovely! Well, I'm going to assume you remember. It's not a thing one forgets lightly. You walked right up to them and essentially turned yourself in.

Nomad had mistakenly assumed that they wouldn't be interested in him because he no longer held the Dawnshard. He thought he'd send them on their way, misunderstanding cleared up. Storms, he'd been a fool. It was a similar attitude that had originally landed him in the army on Roshar, carrying siege equipment.

Do you ever miss the way you were back then?

Indifference. No, that naivete had almost gotten him killed so many times. In the case of the Night Brigade, he'd completely missed the danger. He'd soon learned that, with their twisted arts, they could kill him and fashion a spike from his soul that would lead them to the person he had given the Dawnshard. To them, Nomad was a crucial link in a very important chain. And he was far more useful dead than alive.

Yeah, I thought you wouldn't want to go back to the person you'd been. And you know, I don't miss those days either.

This surprised him, and he sent that emotion. He thought for sure that Auxiliary regretted what he'd become.

What's life about, if not growth? I don't like the person I was back on Roshar either, before we knew each other.

I like change, Nomad. My kind were too static for too long, particularly we highspren. And sometimes the way you talk makes me think you believe, or can pretend, that you are an entirely different person now.

But you aren't. You're still that man. The capacity for what you've become was always there. I guess that sounds depressing or negative, but I don't mean it so. If we pretend that we're a different person each day, then what good does it do? It implies we can't truly change. That we don't learn. We just turn into another being. Does that make sense?

Barely.

I just want to say…I'm glad to be here. Seeing this all with you. Even with the cost, I'm glad to be here.

Something about that twisted Nomad up inside. Auxiliary was barely there, a fragment of the being he'd once been, so brilliant and capable. What kind of damaged individual would be *glad* to have gone through what he had?

But then again, the view from atop the world…looking out over infinite clouds, with stars overhead…

Storms. Nomad couldn't be proud of who he was now. He was a man who couldn't ever go home—not because of the army that chased him, but

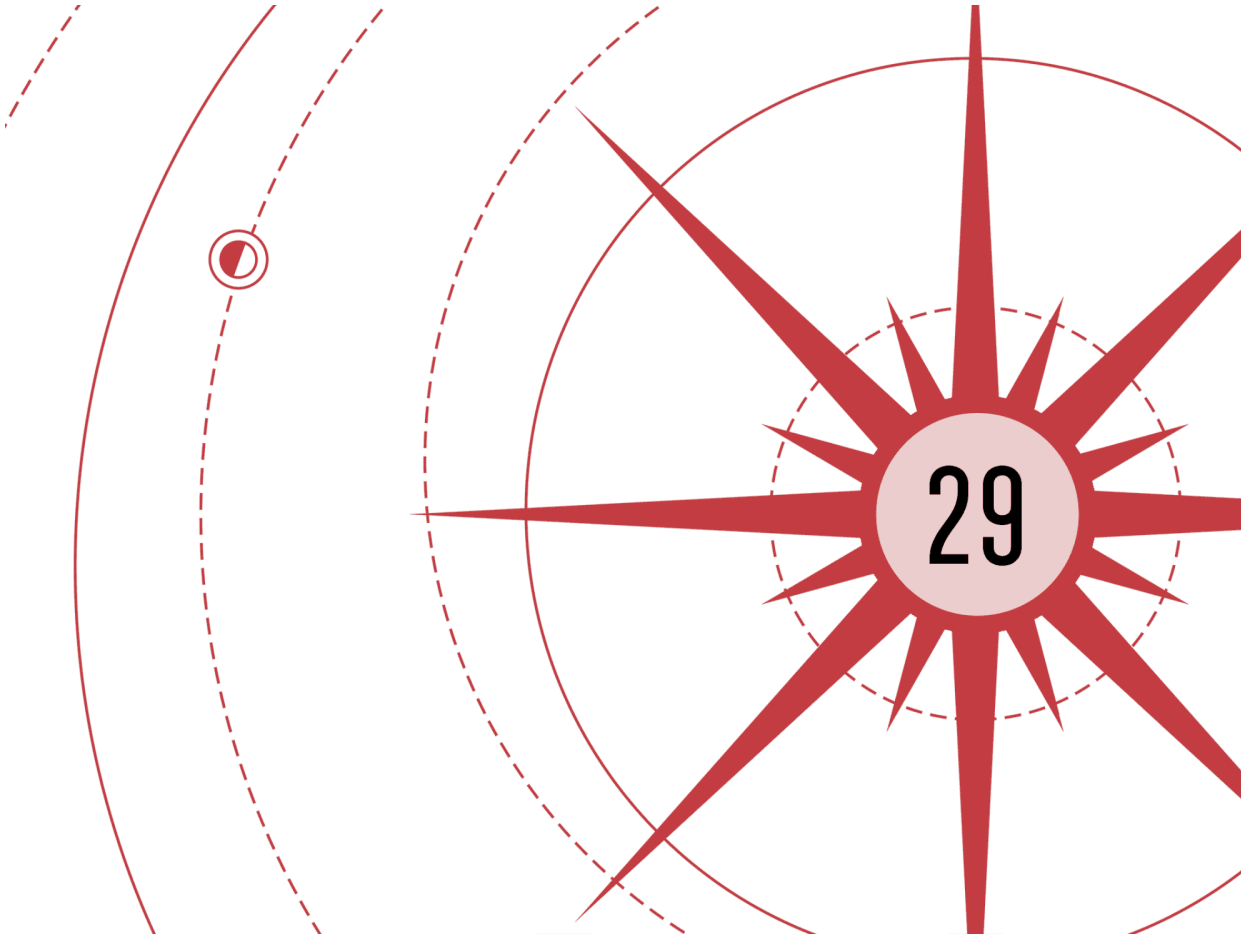
because…because he would never be able to face his friends as the person he'd become.

No, he wasn't someone *different*. He was, indeed, still *himself*. That was what made it painful.

Auxiliary always had been the perceptive one. But he also often misunderstood people. And that was certainly the case with Nomad just then.

He activated the steam jet again, turned, and drove back down into the atmosphere until he could change the engine over to its regular configuration.

By the time he arrived at Beacon, they were ready, excess weight jettisoned, new engine components in place. He'd be going back up that mountain again, this time with a hundred and thirty-five people relying on him not to doom them to a silent death.



"THROTTLE IS RIGHT here," Jeffrey Jeffrey said, scratching at his beard as he moved down the control panel, explaining it to Nomad. "And here, this will let you rotate the city. We only have one primary thruster set to move you laterally. The engineers said that should be enough."

"We don't have to move far forward," Nomad agreed. "Most of the distance we need to cover is vertical."

The two of them stood in the cab of his ship, a smaller room off the main chamber where he'd done his research earlier. They'd positioned his ship in a strange location—locked right on top of the hub, above the Chorus. Underneath his feet, through the metal, those shades were now accompanied by tens of people packed into the space surrounding the Reliquary.

Through the windshield, he could see a forlorn, reduced version of Beacon. A mere twelve ships, arrayed in a circle around the hub—three of them being the giant water-container ships at the outside. He'd imagined it as a flying disc when they'd been assembling it, but "disc" misleadingly

evoked a shape too elegant, too smooth, too intentional. No, this was more like a flying barge made of bulky, warehouse-like ships.

It was vaguely circular, with a central bump one story taller than the rest of it. And he was at the top, such as it was. Jeffrey Jeffrey showed him how to rotate his ship in place, which *was* handy. He could turn the windshield to look back toward the horizon, or keep his eyes forward, aimed at the mountains. A little white-and-green radar screen showed him their proximity to the mountain.

"Here are the controls to drop the water ships once they're empty," Jeffrey Jeffrey said, indicating a control panel that was newly wired in place. "That should be everything."

"What are those controls?" he asked, gesturing to a group on the left of the panel.

"Those control the prospector device underneath your ship," Jeffrey Jeffrey explained. "Not relevant now."

Right. Elegy, before becoming a Charred, had been an explorer. A woman who pushed the limits, both socially and physically. She'd struck out into the shadows with an entire city relying on her. Her ship had been a prospector, intended to help her find signs of Investiture in the great maelstrom between the sun and the darkened land they now flew through. "Thank you," Nomad said. "You should run along now and get someplace safe."

"I could stay," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "We had time, so we sealed your room as well—best we could. It will leak more since we made your door able to open easily. But there *should* be enough air in here the entire flight…"

"Too dangerous," Nomad said. "I can handle this."

"And her?" Jeffrey Jeffrey nodded back to the main chamber of the ship, where Elegy was still chained in place. At least now she could sit down in the corner, rather than being held flat against the wall.

There was no other good place to keep her. They'd jettisoned the ship that had doubled as a jail. He didn't like the idea of letting her stay in a room with innocents.

"She'll be fine there," Nomad said. "Her Investiture should let her survive without oxygen for a while, if it comes to that."

"All right," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. He lingered, looking out through the window—all other windows on the other ships had been covered with steel, welded into place, out of concern that the seals at the corners of the windows wouldn't hold the pressure. So this was Jeffrey Jeffrey's last sight of the

outside world until, hopefully, they touched down on the other side of the mountains.

"Adonalsium's fortune gaze upon you," the man said to Nomad. "And… may you always outrun the sun. In a very present and immediate way, Sunlit."

He left, and a few seconds later, Nomad saw him enter one of the other ships. The door closed, but they'd leave the intakes open until Nomad indicated they needed to seal themselves in.

The city had become a ghost town. A black, huddled collection of structures, lit only by emergency lights. Occupied only by the silent and the dead.

He took the controls and started Beacon upward in the darkness. In the shadow as they were, there wasn't much to see of the mountain, but the radar gave him enough to fly by. He mostly just went up. There was no need to hug the slope.

This feels…more boring than it should.

"Good," Nomad said, watching the throttle—keeping them flying on regular engines at close to full power. "We want this all to be as boring as possible."

How long has it been, the knight asks, since you've been in command of this many people?

"Command? Don't call it that. I'm flying a ship."

You're in charge right now, which makes you captain of this ship. That's a command position.

"Not the same thing."

It isn't your fault, you know, what happened. Events were largely outside your control.

"Never said they weren't."

You still carry that burden.

"It's a small one."

And yet you've always avoided being put into a leadership position again.

"Seems best for everyone that way," he said, nudging the ship a little farther along to the east, up the slope, away from the sun. Still climbing. He waited to see what kind of issue Auxiliary would raise next.

Instead a voice came from behind him.

"You have someone in your head too, don't you?" Elegy asked.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, sitting cross-legged, wrists chained together and hooked to the wall. Her cinderheart glowed a soft red-orange.

“I can see it in you,” she said. “The others say you’re praying. But you’re not. You’re talking to someone in your head. You can hear them, like I used to.”

“Yes,” Nomad agreed. “It’s similar, I guess.”

“Does the voice tell you who to kill?”

“He’s told me to jump off a cliff a few times,” Nomad said with a smile. She obviously didn’t get the joke. “No, Elegy. The voice is my friend. The tool I summon on occasion? That’s his body.”

“Why is he in your head too?”

“It’s complicated. These days, though, he calls me his squire or his valet.” At her confusion, he explained further. “Auxiliary—my friend—has a body, but he can’t control it…directly. Instead he sits in my mind, like a passenger. So he jokes that I’m his valet—his palanquin carrier, you might say—to move him wherever he wants to go.”

And you’re a very ineffective one, I must say. Rarely ever do what I tell you. Maybe we should get you one of those cinderhearts. Then perhaps you’d be more pliant.

“Why don’t you fight?” Elegy asked.

“Who?”

“Everyone,” she said. “The voice held me back, most of the time, then let me loose when there was someone to fight. Now…I want to fight everyone. You said you feel it. I can see you feel it. So why don’t you fight?”

“I choose my fights,” Nomad replied. Outside, the air was thinning. He didn’t need to check the pressure gauge when the engines were so obviously laboring. He gave the order, and the people sealed themselves into their cabins, closing the vents.

He had about two hours, from this point, until they started to run out of oxygen.

“I don’t understand,” Elegy said. “Choose what fights? How?”

Can’t you just explain to her that there’s more than fighting, the hero asks.

He could. But if there was one thing his master had taught him, it was how to lead a conversation. He still did it as naturally as he performed a spear kata.

“I don’t want to fight the people here,” Nomad said. “There’s no challenge to it, for one thing. For another, I want nothing from them.”

“I want the fight from them,” Elegy said. “If you let me free, there would be nothing for me to choose. I would fight you. I’d fight everyone on this ship.”

“And then what?”

“And then…” She trailed off.

“Then you’d die up here in the cold,” Nomad said. “Alone. Great. What have you earned? What have you accomplished?”

“I…”

“You’re going to have to learn to find something else to live for, Elegy.”

“Something…else…?”

“A reason,” Nomad said. “A purpose. Once you have that, you’ll know when to fight, and why. You’ll fight *for* something.” He met her eyes again. “You aren’t going to be able to recover who you once were. I’m reasonably certain she is gone, like a book burned to ashes.

“But you can’t merely be what you are now. If you keep on this way, you’ll end up dead. Probably fast. You’ll howl in rage to the sun, unsatisfied, because the fight was short and pointless. But that fire inside of you isn’t going to go away either. So find something to care about, a reason to channel it. That’s my best advice to you.”

“Then what is your purpose? Why do *you* live?”

Damnation. He’d walked right into that. Perhaps he hadn’t digested Wit’s lessons as well as he’d thought.

“I used to live for my friends,” Nomad said softly. “But those days are gone. Then I lived to protect the cosmere—for a brief time harboring one of its most dangerous secrets. Now…now I live to run.”

She frowned. “And that’s…satisfying, why?”

“It isn’t,” he admitted. “I guess I’m still trying to learn the same lesson.”

“So that’s why you understand,” she said and settled back, closing her eyes. “I see. Yes, I see. Thank you.”

Storming woman. He had the sense that, before all of this, she’d probably been *outrageously* self-righteous. Her memories might not have survived, but some of that attitude did.

I’m embarrassed, the knight admits, how much better she just did my job than I have lately.

“Your job?” he asked in Alethi. “Since when has it been your job to moralize at me?”

Since forever, Nomad. You threw out your conscience years ago, I know, though I never had a chance to meet her. That left the position vacant, regardless, so I appointed myself to fill it. I’d ask how I’m doing, but…well, you are clear evidence of how much of a rookie I still am.

Nomad grunted, smiling despite himself, and checked the elevation. They were barely moving now. So he took a deep breath and engaged the new engines. The entire city *jolted* as if it had been struck by a giant hammer. Then it started upward again.

He released his breath, and he, Elegy, and Auxiliary flew for a time in silence. He felt oddly at peace as they did. He was still running, of course, still being hunted. Yet he could pretend this was a lull, with nothing to do but climb. After a half hour or so of this, however, he noticed their elevation wasn't matching up to projections.

They were moving more slowly than he'd anticipated. He pushed the engines to full power, and though they started moving a little faster, the acceleration soon tapered off.

Around them, the cloud cover was falling away, the mountainside coming into full view. Ringlight bathed the landscape.

Are we even moving?

"We are, but slowly," he said, checking other readings.

He silently urged the ship to rise. And it did, with increasing slowness. He'd miscalculated somewhere. Theoretically they should be going *faster* with each passing moment, as they burned away more water and ejected it from the ship. Instead they were slowing. Not rapidly, but enough that he doubted they'd make the summit before their water ran out.

Nomad? Auxiliary asked. *What's wrong?*

"I don't know," he admitted, checking the throttle controls to make sure they weren't jammed or something. "It could be any number of *tens* of things. Maybe the seals we used don't work in extreme low pressure and are starting to leak. Maybe this method puts too much strain on the engines, making them overheat. Usually you discover these kinds of quirks through stress tests and numerous prototypes. But…we didn't have time for any of that."

He watched the ominous horizon in the rear distance. Light started to stain it, the sun creeping from its den, hungry.

He felt like the worst of the ten fools in that moment. He'd led these people to their deaths, and he didn't even know where his miscalculation was. He knew from sad experience in engineering that these kinds of little problems were numerous—and when one cropped up in an early test, you usually had to use the wreckage to work out what had gone wrong…

Then a wave of relief hit him as he remembered that he'd built in a failsafe for this. He reached over, hitting the button to jettison the first empty

water-carrying ship. It tumbled free, and the larger collection of ships jolted at the sudden loss of mass. Beacon's gyroscopes accounted for the sudden change in the ship's shape and mass, keeping them level as their speed increased.

Not quickly enough. He checked the water gauges and found that the second container ship was also basically empty. He hit the button to eject that one.

Nothing happened.

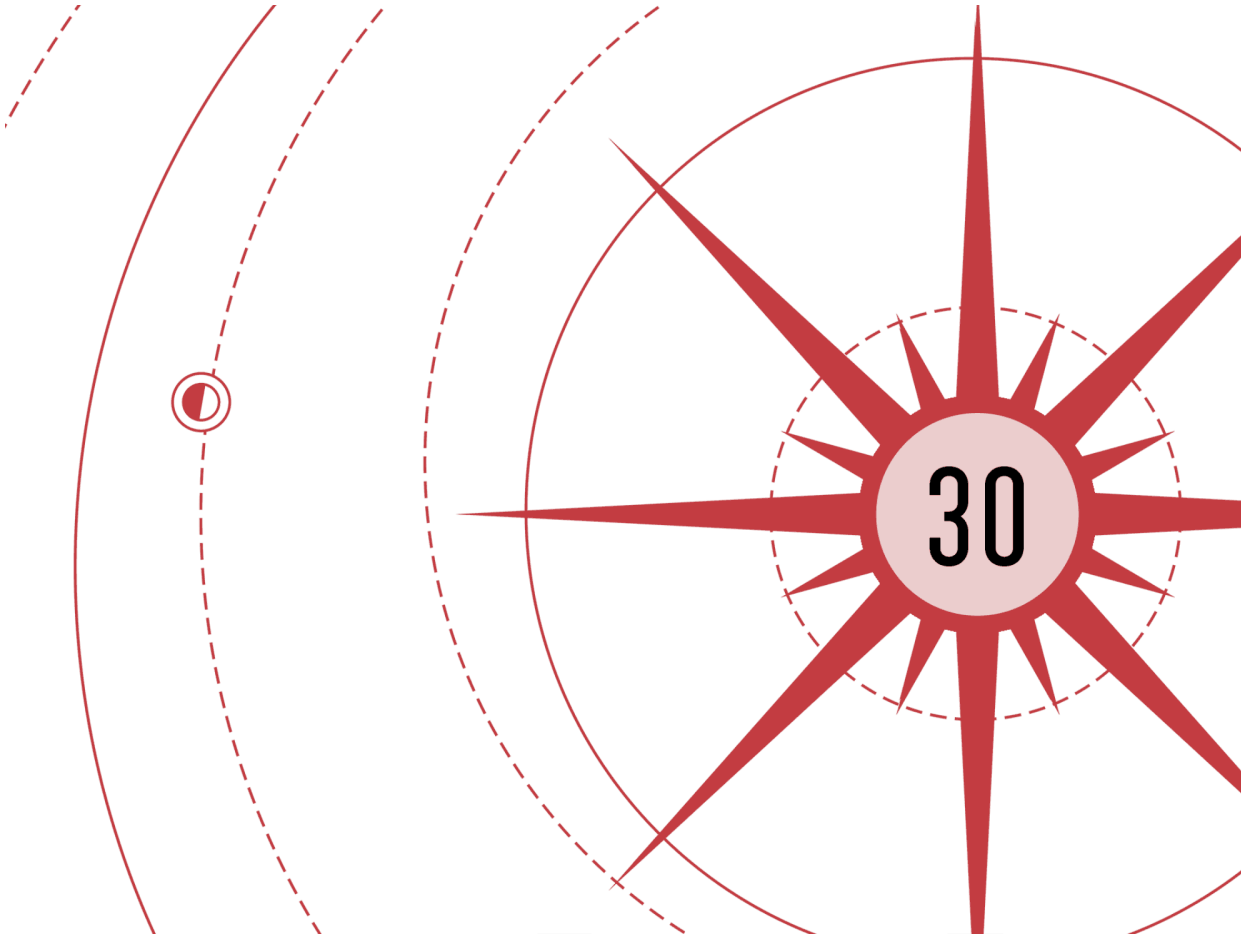
He hit it again.

Nomad?

"The unlocking mechanism is jammed on that second ship," he said, peering through his windshield to see it still latched in place. "We need to jettison it immediately and hope that drops enough weight to speed us up."

Okay. But…how? Can you hotwire the system?

Nomad took a deep breath. "No. We're going to have to go out and do it by hand."



"THIS COULD BE dangerous for you," he said to Elegy, moving through the main cab. "I'm sorry. I'll try to close the door quickly and not lose too much of your air."

"Why do you care…about me?" she asked, frowning.

He stopped by the door. "Human beings have a natural sense of decency, Elegy. Yours might have been burned away. I know a little of what that's like, but it's not how we're meant to be."

"You said you used to live for your friends," she said. "To fight for them. Because of decency?"

"That and so much more," he said. "Aux, I'm not going to be able to speak out there. You'll have to do your best to interpret my emotions."

Understood, trusty valet.

Once upon a time, their bond had been close enough for Nomad to speak his thoughts directly back to Auxiliary. That ability, like several others they'd enjoyed, vanished when Auxiliary had mostly died.

Nomad threw open the door. Of course, that resulted in rapid decompression—but he was prepared. His long coat whipped around him as he jumped out, then threw his weight against the door, slamming it closed and doing up the lock. He wasn't certain how much air he'd retained for Elegy. Hopefully it—plus her natural Investiture—would be enough.

For the time being, he had to worry about the entire city. He ran to the side of the city-ship and reached the empty water vessel. Slow-moving, weighty, intended to move through fields and water the crops—it now hung tipped to the side, deadweight. He immediately figured out the problem.

Ice. They had moved up through the same icy snow he'd noticed during his solo flight—but had spent much more time in it. The deck was crusted in ice, and the locking mechanisms that held the ships together obviously weren't designed for such cold environments. They had frozen over, and many refused to unlatch when activated.

He summoned Aux as a crowbar and found one that hadn't unlatched, ramming Aux in place and throwing his weight against the tool. With some work, he got that lock and the next one undone.

The ship didn't fall, though all of the latches on the deck were now uncoupled. Storms. The locks underneath the vessel, connecting it to the main body of the ship, must also be iced over.

That's…bad, isn't it?

There was only one solution. He had to find a way to undo the latches on the *underside* of Beacon. While flying. He dismissed Auxiliary and ran to his cycle at the edge of the city-ship. They hadn't refilled the water compartment. Damnation.

Damnation, Auxiliary said. *What do we do?*

He popped the seat on his cycle, getting out the towline he'd seen Rebeke use earlier. He threw the coil of reinforced metallic rope over his shoulder, formed Auxiliary as a hook and chain, then stepped up to the side of the ship, standing on a portion that wasn't part of the water ship, just in case it broke free. He gazed down at the ringlit mountainside.

Oh boy, the knight says in a joyless monotone. This is going to be fun.

He hooked Auxiliary in place, then swung down over the side of the ship, descending until he found a secure handhold. He grabbed it, holding on to the metal, then reformed Auxiliary, this time with a knob replacing the hook. He wedged that into a gap nearby in the metal and reformed Auxiliary to fit exactly so that it couldn't just pull free.

That gave Nomad a secure anchor to climb down farther, until he dangled just below Beacon. He looked out across the underside of the composite ship, where eight jets had been spaced equidistantly around the larger one underneath the hub. The tenth ship was being used for lateral motion, its jet tilted up and firing toward the horizon.

When he'd hit the release button, the water ship's engine had disengaged. So it had become an even bigger deadweight, now not contributing thrust to the flight. He hung there for a moment, peering past the brilliant red-orange engines spitting superheated steam in geyseral jets, thinking about the careful balancing of thrusters that was required to get all these engines working in concert. Too much thrust on one side would have flipped the city, but the Beaconite machinery compensated for that distribution instinctively. Zeal had mentioned, when he'd asked, that the Chorus helped somehow.

Did they have something like a rudimentary Awakened difference engine doing these calculations? Fashioned by a shade? That would be…

He shook out of it. No time for such thoughts. If he didn't break that deadweight free, the entire city would slam into the mountain—leaving them all stranded until they were engulfed in a deluge of sunlight that would melt the city-ship to slag.

He would have to reach those locks, which meant traversing across the *bottom* of Beacon until he reached the proper location. It was mostly flat, though it had plenty of nooks for him to lock in Auxiliary's hooks. However, moving around down here would take him uncomfortably close to at least one of those scalding jets.

At least he wasn't deafened by their roar. It was barely there in this thin air. The near vacuum would also insulate him from the worst of the heat, as long as he avoided direct contact, which was another small comfort. He grabbed the bottom lip of the side of Beacon, then dismissed Auxiliary, hanging by one hand—for a few heart-pounding moments—above a drop of hundreds of feet.

By now, the people of Beacon might be getting light-headed from the lack of oxygen. Some might be slipping into unconsciousness already. So if he fell here, they'd never wake up. And his long run would be stopped not by the Night Brigade, but by the day's deadly sunlight.

He reformed Auxiliary into a chain with hooks on both ends, then swung under the ship and hooked Auxiliary on a valve. Then he took the other end of the chain and used that to swing by one arm to latch that hook into another location. Each time he swung, he would make the end fuzz to

indeterminacy and then reform, locked into place in an indentation on the bottom of the ship.

It was eerie, doing this in silence, Investiture helping his body compensate for the low pressure and lack of oxygen. He couldn't do that indefinitely, as his stores would eventually run out, but he had plenty for this task. Keeping him alive, renewing his muscles so they didn't fatigue and drop him. He used this arm-under-arm swing to maneuver slowly around the nearest of the jets—a blinding column of superheated steam and light, violent and powerful, that could be felt as infrared radiation in the vacuum.

The fact that he felt anything from this jet was an indication of just how much energy was pouring out of it. He rounded it and reached the place where the deadweight ship was locked onto the rest of Beacon. There, he hung for a moment to gather his wits.

Once, he'd found it difficult during moments like this not to gasp for air, but his training had often required him to hold his breath. The power that had fed him during his youth escaped when he breathed, so he learned to hold it in, even during frantic moments of battle.

He started forward again, eyes on the first lock just ahead. He undid his left-hand hook and swung out—but his right-hand hook had not been latched in as well as he'd thought. In a moment of visceral terror, he felt it slip. Storms! In a panic, he seized the chain with both hands as it went taut.

He jolted, clinging to the tenuous chain, the sweat on his skin instantly vaporizing in the low-pressure environment and boiling away. The chain ground on the steel above him, slipped, then caught again—but that second jolt made him drop a little farther, his fingers barely clinging to the end of the chain.

Damnation, Auxiliary said. *Nomad. Hang on. Please.*

Nomad tried to stabilize the hook, mentally commanding it to grow wider—but his mistake had been placing it on a little rim that Auxiliary couldn't easily form around to get a proper grip.

Beneath him, the bleak slope of the mountain was getting ever closer. And in the distance, the very first lights of false dawn grew on the horizon.

Nomad, Auxiliary said. *It may be time to do something drastic. I have… strength left. You could fly again. Only a little, but perhaps enough to—*

No. *NO!* He thought it forcefully.

They both knew this truth, but had never said it out loud. In the past, he'd burned away Auxiliary in a moment of power, ignorant of what he'd been doing—of what he'd been capable of doing. His body had sought whatever

energy it could find, and his friend—made of pure energy—had been too convenient a source.

All these years, Auxiliary had existed as a mere remnant of what he'd once been. But it was the most important fragment—Auxiliary's personality and mind—that remained. Fuel, if needed.

Never, Nomad thought.

I can't let you die, Auxiliary said. *I can't let the city crash. If you could fly —*

In response, Nomad started climbing. Hand over hand, determined, feverish. With cracked, dry hands, trembling at the thought of…of again…

Auxiliary fell silent, but Nomad knew what his friend would do if the chain slipped. The unspoken horror.

NEVER AGAIN, Nomad thought, reaching the bottom of the ship and slamming the other end of the chain into a more secure position. He dangled there as sweat beaded on his face and instantly vanished, fleeting kisses of cool.

Thank you, Auxiliary said, *for caring.*

Nomad tried to send an impression of anger—of insistence that Auxiliary never bring up this topic again. He swung once more to reach the proper lock, then unwound the tow cable. It looked like all four of the locks on the bottom side had frozen closed. But hopefully he wouldn't need to undo them all before the weight of the ship snapped the others.

Now what? the hero asks hesitantly.

In response, Nomad used the tow cable to tie himself into place. He gave the line a little slack, so he hung down four feet beneath the ship. Then he formed Auxiliary into a large metal pole with a flat end.

Nomad wedged the flat end into the lock, then heaved, putting his entire weight on the bar. Auxiliary's physical form was literally deific—and wouldn't break or bend under any natural circumstances. But the Beaconite engineers had done their jobs well, and this was *not* a good angle from which to pry open the mechanism.

Worse, friction was working against him. Above, the locks had popped free easily, but that was because the angle of the ship detaching had helped pull them free. That same angle was putting weight *on* these locks, making them difficult to wedge apart.

Nomad. The mountain.

He didn't need to look. Yes, they were close—and drifting closer. Only a few dozen yards from collision. Moving slowly, but inevitably. He heaved

harder, but nothing happened. And he worried he'd made a miscalculation again. These ships, when they locked into place, probably had mechanisms at the sides—not just the top and bottom. The latches he was trying to open, they might not even be the most important part of what kept the ships together. Too flimsy.

There might be reinforced clamps or docking mechanisms he couldn't see. If that were true…

He tried again, angling the long crowbar differently. Nothing. He needed something better.

Storms. The people. They *needed* him.

But he couldn't…he couldn't make a weapon. He…

Not a weapon, Auxiliary seemed to whisper. *Just another tool. To protect the city, Nomad.*

The end of the crowbar sharpened.

In that second, he held something he'd not held in quite some time. A symbol from Nomad's past. The implement of a warrior, practiced in secret, then displayed in grandeur. Sharp enough to slice through metal. He rammed it upward into the gap, slashing free the lock and something above, a bar or mechanism locking the ships together.

That was enough. The ship lurched, then broke free and crashed to the barren stone beneath, tumbling along the mountainside, ripping up stone as it went. Nomad hung on as Beacon shook, its primary engine roaring and spraying heat in a column of light and fury. He felt the ship rise faster, though it was almost imperceptible from his vantage.

Heart pounding, Nomad unhooked himself and used Auxiliary to reach the perimeter of the ship. Soon after, he climbed onto the metal deck. He stood tall, looking toward that terrible horizon. Sunlight trying to break free as the ship rose to meet it. Higher. Higher.

The right side of the ship *ground* against stone, sending tremors through the entire structure. Nomad fell to his knees, still looking west at that terrible light.

The grinding stopped as the ship finally, barely, crested the top of the mountain.

We did it, the knight rejoices. Nomad, we did it. But we're still rising.

Storms. Nomad turned and scrambled for the control building, terrified that they'd get this close to their goal, only to end up rising so high that—

Sunlight bathed him as the ship left the shadow of the planet. Calm, warm, *ordinary* sunlight.

What the hell?

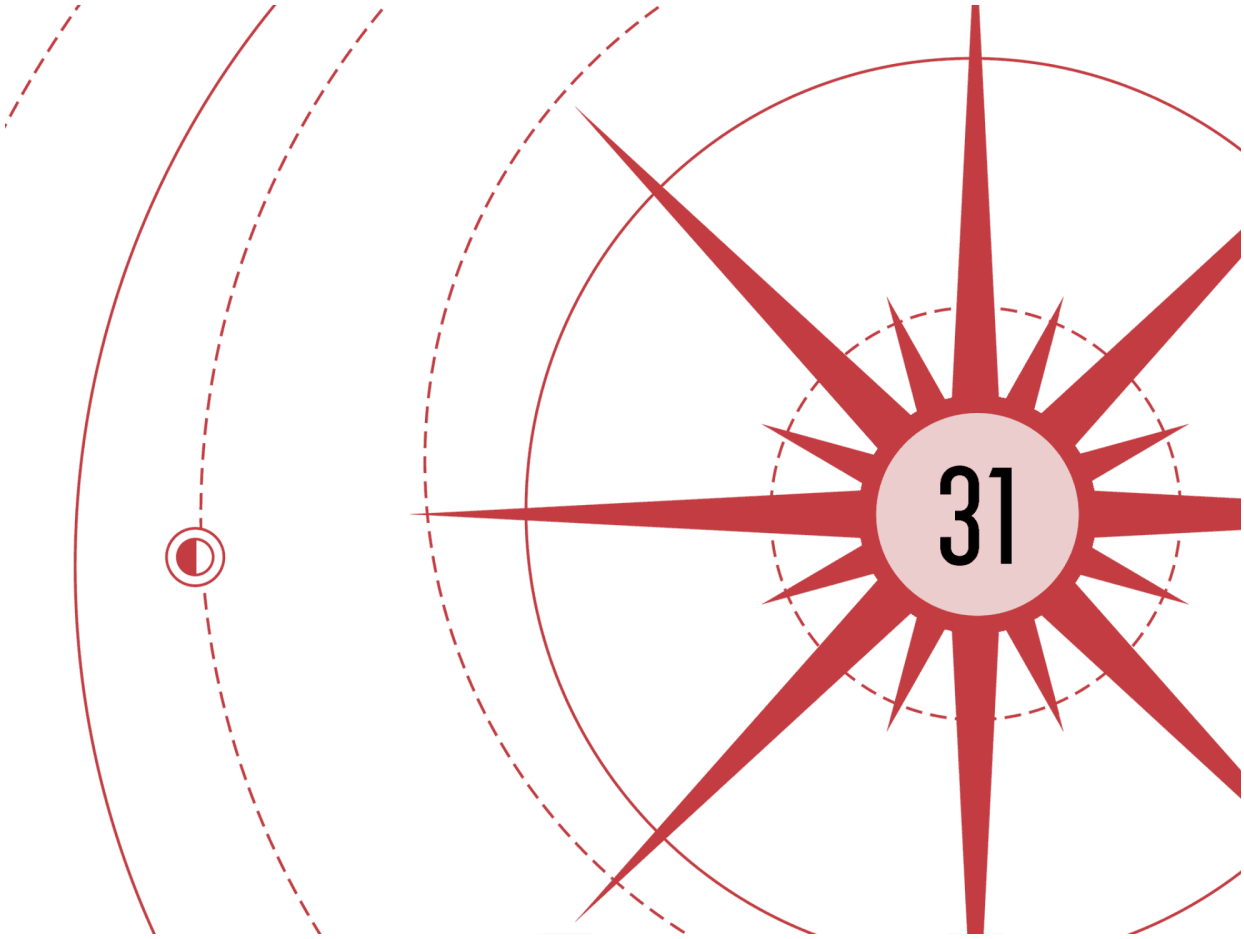
He stood there for a long moment, suspended above the mountaintop, but nothing happened to him or Beacon. He'd noticed earlier that the Night Brigade ship had approached without its shield being overwhelmed. What was going on? Why could they hang there, in the light, and not be destroyed?

Damnation. He hated working on so little information. If the solar strength was extremely high, it would have ripped away the atmosphere of this planet, so far as he understood. And why were there always mountains at the poles? Shouldn't the planet, constantly being melted, form a sphere? Or was it naturally an oval, with gravity pulling more air to the equator, making it seem like there were mountains at the poles when, in reality, those were just the edges of the oval sticking out of the atmosphere? Was that even possible?

As he pondered, Beacon stopped vibrating. He frowned at the strange stillness. The engines had cut out. What did that mean? Why would they…

They were out of water. No more propellant.

With a sickening twist deep in his core, he felt the entire Beacon complex begin to fall down the back side of the mountains—with no engines to slow its descent.



THIS WAS BAD.

It was also great, because the ship had managed to cross over the tip of the mountain before running out. So as they plummeted, they slipped into the mountain's shadowed shelter.

He was *not* ready for an uncontrolled descent, though. Storms. They'd run out of water far faster than he'd planned. Everything he and the engineers had done involved enormous amounts of guesswork. That considered, they were lucky it had gone as well as it had.

In growing darkness, he crossed the deck of the ship. At least up here he didn't have to worry about being swept off by the wind. He fell at the same speed as the ship, and though he had to use Auxiliary at some points to give him handholds, he eventually made it back to the hub and climbed up to reach the *Dawnchaser*'s door.

He'd anticipated hitting the mountain on the way down, but so far, nothing. The steep, craterlike cliff on this side was a tiny blessing. He hauled

himself through the door, noticing Elegy unconscious—hopefully *just* unconscious—in the corner. In his absence, the cabin had depressurized completely.

He pulled himself through the room, now fully in free fall, gravity meaningless for the next few moments. Engines. He had to get the regular engines going. He was starting to hear wind whistling outside the still-open door. Once they got back into thicker air, the regular engines should work again. Only, once he reached the control panel, he found them stalled completely. Running out of water—which had also been acting as a coolant—had caused them to lock up.

Storms. He looked at the button that Jeffrey Jeffrey had explained, in passing, was for reigniting the system. It all came down to this? After all his effort, it was about pushing a button?

That, and waiting.

The engines wouldn't start if he pushed it too soon. Storms, they might not start anyway. Running out of coolant while superheated in a vacuum… that was the sort of thing that completely destroyed machinery.

He resisted the urge to pound that button repeatedly. Warning lights indicating overheating flashed all across the panel. Air. They needed air. That would cool the engines as they fell. Allow the heat to dissipate.

Nomad, the knight asks with marked hesitance, what are you doing? Push the button.

He waited, watching the readouts, his feet hooked under the chair to hold him to the seat. He tried to explain, but there wasn't enough air yet. So he waited. Excruciatingly he waited.

Nomad, I really think you should push the stupid button.

Outside the window, he could see the dark slope of the mountain moving faster and faster as their descent accelerated. That *was* air rushing outside.

Nomad. Please.

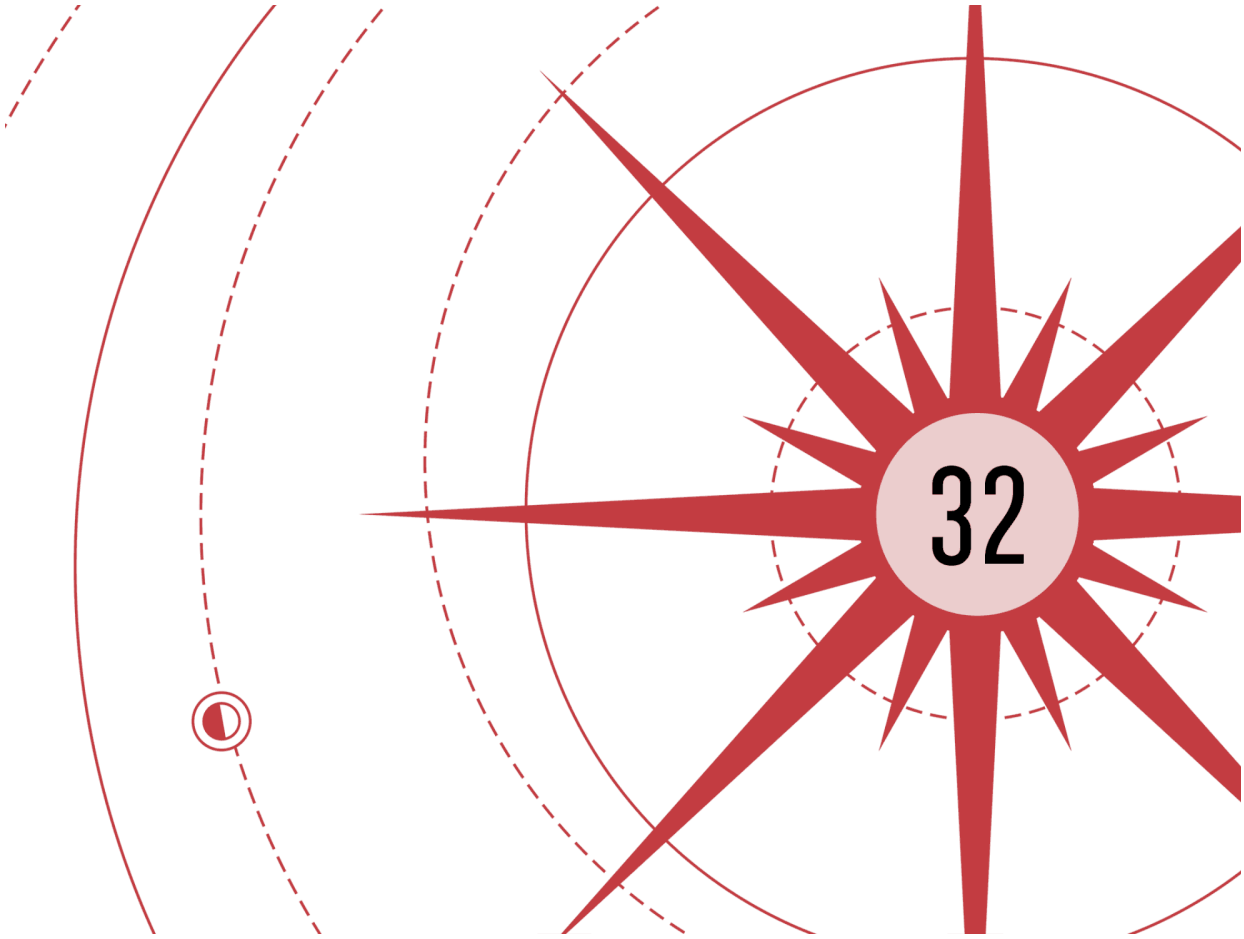
He took a deep breath of actual air—and spoke. "Not yet."

When?

He watched the indicators on the dials crawl from the red toward the orange for a few seconds. As soon as they hit the line, he slammed down on the button.

Four of the ten remaining engines fired up. With blasts that made his teeth rattle, they strained to slow the ship.

And then Beacon crashed into the ground.



HE SLAMMED THE emergency release button, which would unseal the doors of every room holding the people of Beacon. They could open the doors from the inside, but there was a good chance many of them were unconscious. It depended on how well the rooms had been sealed and how much the occupants had hyperventilated. One of the great ironies of life was that people running out of air often worried so much, they used it up faster.

That done, he checked Elegy—still alive. At least, the cinderheart was still glowing, and he thought she was breathing. No heartbeat, of course. No heart. He wasn't sure how that worked for her—there were different ways an Invested body made sure its cells were being sustained.

Time to see how much damage had been done to the ships. He stumbled to the door, but then immediately realized a danger he hadn't yet considered. He was standing on top of a containment unit housing extremely volatile, incorporeal Invested beings. Ghosts. Shades. Whatever one wanted to call them, they were among the most dangerous entities in the cosmere.

He'd just crashed their enclosure to the ground, then hit the door release button without a second thought. He hesitated on the threshold of his ship, wondering if he'd have time to get the vessel disengaged and flying on its own before they came for him, eyes red, hungry.

Fortunately he soon saw a few unsteady figures stumble out of the main hub ship just below. They didn't look like *they'd* been eaten. He descended, passing the majority who chose to quickly settle down on the deck. Inside, the ghost enclosure looked solid, not even cracked. Wisely they had built it out of their strongest stuff.

He checked to make sure all the other doors had opened, and found that two of the ten had leaked badly. The people inside had fared worse than the others, but there were no dead—just a few unconscious people, a lot of bumps, several broken limbs. At his suggestion, the Greater Good had been separated across three different ships, and all had survived the landing basically intact.

Rebeke emerged from a different ship, helping an older man Nomad didn't know. The man looked up at the stars, tears in his eyes, and began a quiet prayer of thanks. Noticing Nomad, Rebeke stepped over, clearly still dazed.

"It worked," she whispered. "I…I doubted you. I thought it wouldn't work. Why didn't I believe?"

"Because you're smart," Nomad replied. "It was a crazy plan."

"It was *your* plan."

"And I'm an expert on how risky my ideas get," he said. "I'm amazed we're both standing here right now."

The knight doesn't understand why Rebeke is glaring. After all, this is exactly the sort of stupid thing Nomad says all the time.

"Well," Rebeke finally said, "we're alive."

"Agreed," he said, looking over the gathering group of sore, partially suffocated, emotionally battered people. "For now. Let's go find the engineers. We're going to want to find out how badly I've wrecked your city."

"YOU WANT TO KNOW how bad it is?" Solemnity Divine asked. "I'd offer that we're somewhere between 'Oh, shades, what a mess' and 'I didn't even know that part could come off!'"

They stood inside the hall surrounding the Chorus's mist-filled enclosure that had blessedly remained intact. The usual team. Jeffrey Jeffrey, Zeal, Rebeke, and the Greater Good. Compassion sat on the ground, wrapped in a blanket, while the others stood.

Having jettisoned the previous building they'd used for meetings, they had picked this one for some insane reason. Perhaps it was seen as official or something. Or maybe it had just been the first of the chambers to be evacuated following the wreck.

"Lay it out straight, if it pleases you, Solemnity Divine," Confidence said. "How dire is our current situation?"

"Six engines locked up completely and will need a full injector replacement," she said. "Mud rammed into all the downward-facing jets. Smashed-up intakes on three junction points, and some of the clasping mounts were broken by the crash. I'd suggest we fly separately from here on out, as I can't guarantee the integrity of the whole."

"That's not…too bad," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "Is it?"

"Depends," Solemnity Divine said, spreading her hands wide. "My team can fix this. We *might* even be able to do it before the sun rises."

"We have extra time," Contemplation agreed. "Because of the mountains. Though we'll need a corridor of shadow from the sun to escape—so we can't hide here forever."

"Two and a half hours, maybe a little more," Zeal said. "That's what the navigators told me. Any longer than that, and we'd have to cross a field of fire to get back into the dusk."

Two and a half of their hours. Those mountains were extremely tall for the size of the planet, giving quite a shadow to shelter Beacon. Particularly with the slow rotation of the planet, he could understand where that much time came from.

It was still a frighteningly small amount of time to solve their problems.

"I already have the Chorus fabricating parts," Solemnity Divine said. Indeed, sounds came softly from the center of the enclosure. More unnervingly though, Nomad was *sure* he heard someone whisper an echo to her words each time she spoke. "And in the time remaining, I might be able to get the ships into flying shape. Except they won't move, even once they're repaired."

"Sunhearts," Nomad guessed. "We're out of power."

"The engines burned hotter—but less efficiently—than we'd hoped," she said, nodding in agreement. "We've got almost nothing left. It's a miracle we

landed—only four of the engines fired, and with many that didn't, it was because their sunhearts were depleted."

"So," Compassion said from her seated position, "we're stopped. Frozen."

The word seemed to carry more weight for them, burdened with context that Nomad could guess at. This was a world where being frozen, being stopped, was death.

"We're going to have to steal some souls," Zeal said with a firm nod. "If it pleases all, I shall gather my team. Do we have enough power to fly one ship on a raid, then back?"

"Yes," Solemnity Divine said. "But…who are you going to raid?"

"You can't go south, Zeal," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "Not unless we want to try to cross even *more* highlands."

"North is the Cinder King," Rebeke said softly, from where she stood just outside their circle. As if she weren't sure she was wanted or not.

"He's got plenty of sunhearts to spare," Nomad said, "after feeding your captive friends to the sun. Won't those be coming up soon? The sunhearts that were made the first time I stood in the sunlight?"

"First time?" Rebeke asked.

Nomad nodded upward with his chin. "Up there, the sunlight struck me on the deck of Beacon, but didn't do anything. I'm still trying to figure out why…"

They all regarded him with reverence.

"It wasn't me being Sunlit," he said. "The ship didn't melt either."

That didn't help their looks of amazement. As if they thought he had protected the entire ship—as if he had the power to shield them all from the sunlight somehow.

You know, the knight says with a wry sense of amusement, you always complain about the legends you start. Then you say things like this…

"Regardless," Nomad said, forging forward, "the Cinder King created a whole big group of new sunhearts yesterday—and the spot where he did should be just ahead of us."

"The souls of our friends, left in the sunlight," Zeal said with a solemn nod. "We know the longitude. If we use the prospector, we could find them."

"The Cinder King always guards the border between the great maelstrom and the shadow," Confidence said. "He doesn't want anyone else to claim the sunhearts there."

"Explain this to me again," Nomad said, frowning, trying to form a mental image. "The day side of the planet is incinerating heat and melted rock. I

understand that. But there's also a…storm you call the great maelstrom? Is this storm more violent than the one we flew through in the darkness?"

"Yes," Compassion whispered. "The great maelstrom follows the sunset, when the planet first passes into night. It's a raging tempest of incredible violence. When the land finally cools and the storm dissipates, the shadow begins—the cloud cover we hide in. That line is where sunhearts are collected."

"We raid him right there, then," Nomad said. "Attack at the collection point and steal some. How far away is that?"

"For a fast ship?" Zeal said. "It can be as little as an hour's flight from near-dawn to the great maelstrom."

Again Nomad was struck by the tiny size of this planet. Around two hundred miles at most in diameter, by his quick calculations. Amazing.

"So there's a chance," he said. "We have two and a half hours. We fly in, we steal sunhearts, we get back here."

"It won't work," Confidence said, folding her bony arms. "We raided him just recently. He's not going to be taken unaware again."

"Perchance," Zeal said. "But if I may offer a counterargument, he can't have expected us to survive that ascent, right? So far as he presumes, we were destroyed and he is the victor. Perhaps we can steal a Union scout ship, so that nobody realizes it's us, and get in close enough to steal some sunhearts right out of his vessels."

"Steal one of their ships?" Contemplation said. "In time? Yes, your words have merit, and he might assume we are dead. But I cannot imagine stealing a ship and executing such a plan in the span we have. I agree with Confidence, Zeal. We had weeks to plan the previous raid and were blessed by your device that could freeze his Charred."

"I can do it," Zeal promised. "Please. Let me try to save our people."

"Or," Nomad said, "we could try something else." He thumbed upward. "That's Elegy's *Dawnchaser*, right? A reinforced prospector?"

"And?" Contemplation said.

"And, as you've explained, the Cinder King always collects his sunhearts *after* the maelstrom has passed. What if we didn't wait? What if we were to fly ahead of him and steal them right out of the ground before he gets to them? Inside the storm?"

Collectively they gaped at him.

All right, the knight says, that's fun. I like the way you make their brains melt. It's cute.

Confidence sputtered. “Survive the great maelstrom? It’s impossible.”

“Nobody goes *into* the maelstrom,” Contemplation said. “It’s madness.”

“Same is said of the storm on my homeworld,” Nomad said. “But I know someone who survived it, then inspired a whole host of us to do the same.” He pointed at Elegy’s ship again. “You told me that was reinforced for flying into the maelstrom.”

“It never managed to go fully into the storm!” Solemnity Divine said. “I helped reinforce it, but the sensors always told her she’d die. She always backed down.”

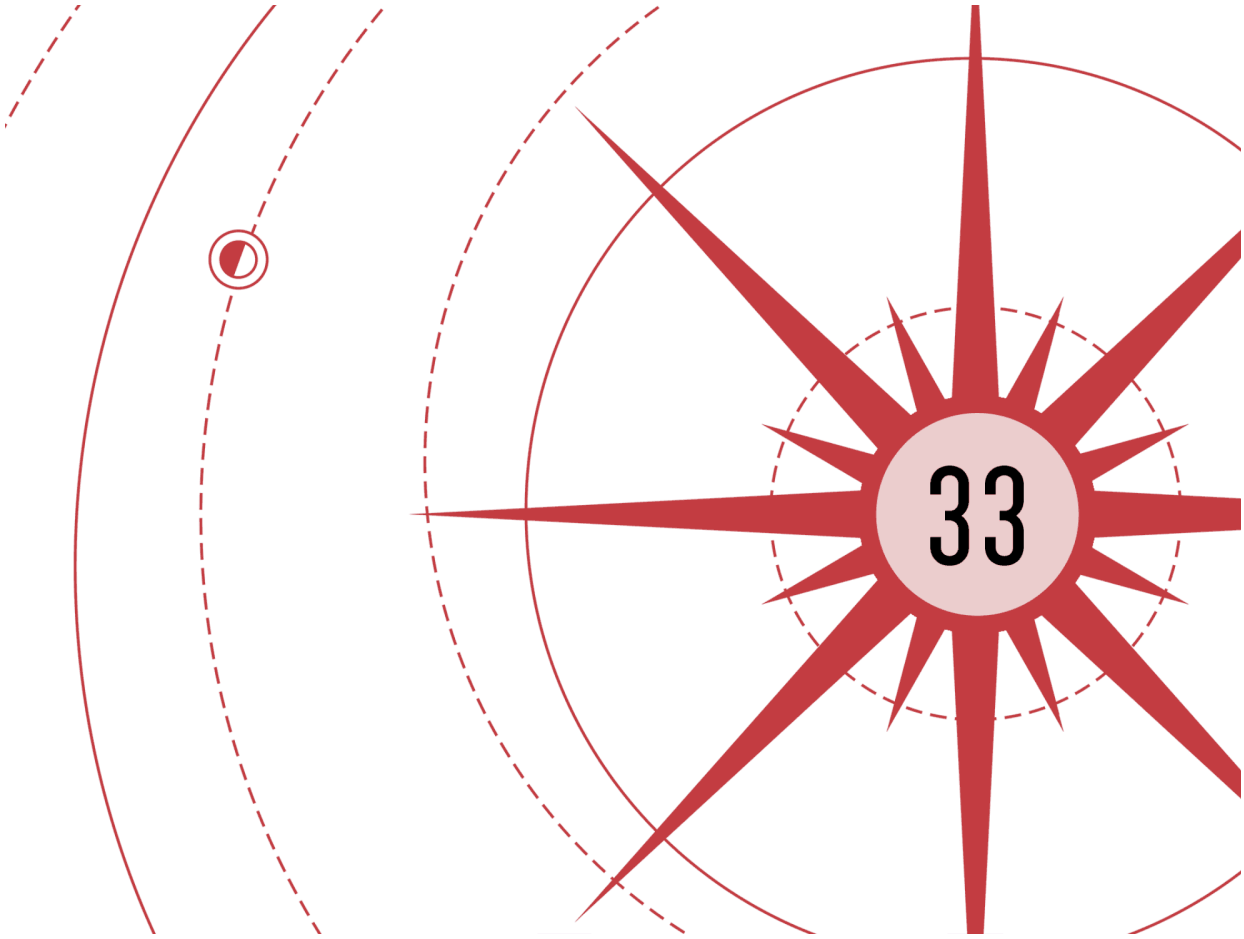
“She never actually flew into the great maelstrom?” Nomad asked.

“No,” Rebeke said. “Because she’s not *insane*.”

Nomad gestured to the sides, indicating the entire ship below them. One that had just climbed a mountain. “It’s a day for insanity, folks. A day for risks.”

They were all silent.

“I’m in,” Zeal said. “Let’s do it, Sunlit. Let’s steal from the sun itself.”



THEY WERE OFF in under ten minutes—the amount of time it took to unlock Elegy's ship and gather Zeal's team. The four people were more rough-and-tumble than the rest of the Beaconites he'd met—with thick work gloves, overalls of coarse cloth, and long coats. When they spoke, there was less sugar in their language and a lot more spice.

He'd begun to think of these people as monolithic, but that was never true. Even two siblings would reflect their culture and upbringing in different ways.

Nomad tasked Rebeke with the actual flying, and they lifted off, skimming the muddy ground, leaving Beacon—what was left of it—huddled in the mountain's shadow, helpless before the advancing sun. Nomad wished the *Dawnchaser* were more dynamic—and a little less like some kind of bulbous insect.

"So let me get this straight," said one of Zeal's team—a beefy guy swathed in so much leather that Nomad wondered if he'd depopulated an

entire corridor of beasts to make the outfit. “We are flying *into* the blessed maelstrom itself.”

“Indeed,” Zeal said, standing on one of the seats by the wall, leaning back, arms folded.

“*Then*,” the guy continued, “we are going to get *out of the ship*—still in the great maelstrom, mind you—and find the blessed sunhearts?”

“Yup,” Zeal said. “Well, *you’ll* be getting out of the ship to harvest them, Hardy. I’ll be running operations from the comfort of the cab, probably munching on some tea cakes. Oh, and we dumped all our harvesting machinery, so you’ll have to dig them out by hand.”

The group chuckled. From what Nomad had gathered, this was how they ran operations—Zeal organized and maintained the team, but he relied on the others to do most of the fieldwork.

“You blessed fool,” Hardy said. “We’re all a group of *blessed* fools.”

Wait, the knight says. Is that fellow using the word “blessed” as…as a curse?

“It’s a conservative religious society,” Nomad said in Alethi. “You use the tools you’re given.” Then, before any of the others could interject, he spoke in their language. “*I’ll* be going out into the storm, not any of you. We brought you because Zeal insisted that I have you here for backup.”

All four stared at him, then they nodded as one.

“Well, that’s good enough for me, then,” Hardy said, settling back. “Wake me when we get there.”

“You’ll know,” Zeal said with a grin. “Oh, you’ll know.” He looked to Nomad. “We’re behind you, Sunlit. It’s enough for me that you think this will work.”

“I appreciate it,” Nomad said with a nod.

In the corner, Elegy began to stir, finally. They’d brought her because, as before, there was really no other place to put her. He supposed they could have locked her to a random part of Beacon’s deck, but in the frenzy of motion getting ready to leave, he honestly hadn’t thought about that.

She blinked awake, then pulled back against the corner, glaring with primal confusion at the assembled group. Until her eyes settled on Nomad. Recognizing him, she seemed to relax.

He turned and climbed into the cab with Rebeke, wanting to keep his eyes forward. Always running. Always watching for the next chasm to jump.

Are you worried, the hero muses, about how much those people back there trust you?

"Not if it helps us all keep moving," Nomad said.

Would they tell you, though, if this were a terrible idea?

"They did tell me."

And went along with it anyway.

"Because it's going to work," Nomad said. He settled into the copilot's seat next to Rebeke. On the dash next to her was a small glowing fragment of sunheart. It didn't have much of a charge, but he was still surprised to see it. He thought they'd gathered all those up and bundled them together for this ship to use as a power source.

"Thank you," she said to him, "for letting me come along. The others always treat me as some kind of…memento or figurehead or…"

"Mascot," Nomad said.

"I don't know that word."

"Kind of like a good-luck charm."

"Because they followed my sister, their great Lodestar, and to a lesser extent my brother," she said. Her voice caught a little when she mentioned him. "They don't follow me, though."

"You're young," Nomad said. "People underestimate the young."

"Can you…" She took a deep breath, steeling herself, gloved hands on the controls. "Can you teach me to be a killer?"

"I'm not so good at it myself these days."

"What do you mean?" she said. "I've seen you resist. I know you're a killer."

He smiled. If she thought this shell of what he'd once been was a killer… "I don't have time to teach you, Rebeke. Give me a few weeks and maybe I could train you in some combat skills. But that's merely learning to fight. Learning to kill…it's something else."

"They're different?"

"One requires skill. The other…"

"No conscience?" she asked softly.

"It's the existence of a conscience that makes it difficult. Combat training is about preparing you to act *regardless* of conscience—usually via repetition. We make it so that your body knows what to do before you actively consider what it will mean. Or what it will cost you."

"That sounds horrible," she whispered.

"You're the one who asked."

She gripped the control wheel tighter, eyes forward—though the landscape had grown dark. They'd entered the shadow of cloud cover, and

rain sprayed the windshield.

"You don't need to be a killer," he said, "to get people to respect you, Rebeke."

"Then how?"

"Keep following your gut. Keep doing what needs to be done. You'll get there."

"When?"

"Can't say," he replied. "But don't be so eager. There are burdens to being in charge that you're not considering. I guarantee it."

She glanced at him. "Is that what happened to you?"

"Let's just say that leadership didn't agree with me."

That's not true, Nomad. You were a good leader.

"Aux, 'good' isn't enough. Life, like measurements in science, often depends entirely on your frame of reference." Then, to keep Rebeke from brooding, he reverted to her language. "I think Elegy is getting better."

"She remembered something?" Rebeke said, eager.

"No," he said. "But earlier she didn't seem quite so feral, quite so eager to kill everyone around her. We had a conversation before we went up the mountain. I think it might have gotten through to her."

"Thank you," Rebeke said, "for caring about her."

"I have empathy for abandoned soldiers," Nomad said. "Being one myself." He nodded toward the sliver of sunheart—just a fragment, smaller than a person's pinkie finger. "What's that?"

She glanced at it. "Mother's soul," she said softly. "The main core was drained almost entirely in the escape. Solemnity Divine cut me off this small piece, as she thought I might want to keep it close on this mission."

"Do you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm starting to wonder if I fixate too much on the dead and not enough on living."

Strange words, the knight notes, for a woman who lives in a society that is powered by the dead.

Nomad picked it up off the dash. He still needed a way to tweak his own soul, to make it so he could fight—actually fight—if he needed to. "Mind if I take it, then?"

"Go ahead," she replied. "I thought that if I kept her sunheart close, I'd feel her. But I never have."

He mused on that, turning the sliver of sunheart over in his fingers. Then he sat back, closing his eyes. "I'm an idiot," he muttered.

Now, now, the knight says. You're not an idiot, Nomad. An idiot is someone without knowledge or ability. You're something else: a person with knowledge or ability who misuses it. That makes you a fool instead.

"And you got those definitions from…"

Wit, naturally.

"Of course."

So what are you being a fool about?

"These sunhearts," he said, tapping the sliver with his fingernail, "worked on Elegy because everyone on this planet is Connected. I'm not sure how or why, but their souls see one another as the same. They can share heat with one another. It's become deeply embedded in their culture. But they couldn't do it with me, even when I wanted to. So…"

So this sunheart can't draw strength from your soul, because it's from this planet, and you aren't.

"Exactly. Linguistic Connection isn't enough. I'd need something more to be able to draw upon this." He could feed off their power, like he could almost all forms of Investiture. But the sunhearts refused to let him put anything back in, to lance his soul, because they didn't accept him as one of them.

It's useless to you, then?

"I could maybe hack it with some rare devices," he said. "Which I don't have access to here." With a sigh, he heaved himself from the seat.

He had been so very close to escaping the Torment in some small way. Realizing it was impossible felt like hitting a wall.

He wanted to be moving. Physically, not just in a vehicle. He entered the back room, but there wasn't a lot of space here for pacing. Zeal and his team —except Hardy, who was napping by the wall—had huddled together and were munching on some rations, laughing.

How do they take such joy? the knight wonders. They're right on the edge of destruction.

"They've always lived on the edge of destruction," Nomad replied. "I suppose they learned to find happiness in the moments between disasters."

Then…what's wrong with you? Why can't you do that?

Auxiliary asked it without malicious intent; Nomad knew him well enough to tell that, even without vocal inflections. It still felt like a dagger to the gut.

He closed his eyes to the laughing people and settled down on a bench near the wall.

“They know me too,” Elegy whispered.

He glanced to where she sat, chained. He knew some women caretakers had helped her with physical needs earlier, but he felt a stab of shame for the raw skin at the sides of the manacles and the way her outfit—that long open-fronted robe and trousers—hadn’t been changed since they’d pulled her out of the mud.

She was focused on Zeal and his team, her eyes…confused? Her expressions were tough to read.

“They keep looking at me,” she continued, “as if expecting to see a spark of familiarity. Like…I don’t know. I used to have words to describe such things. I no longer do.”

“They did know you,” he said. “Everyone in Beacon did.”

“I don’t remember them, yet they all remember me,” she said. “Yes…they *remember* me, but they don’t *know* me. Not anymore.”

“There are some,” he said, “who would find that liberating. You’re completely free from who you used to be, Elegy. You can make of yourself whatever you want. There are many who would like to abandon the burdens of their pasts.”

“You?”

“No. Not me.” He looked up at the ceiling, wishing he could see the stars. “I don’t particularly *like* who I am, but I cherish what I’ve learned about myself. It lets me trust in certain truths.”

“I don’t know what to trust or believe,” she said. “The voice in my head was so confident…”

“Do you think *it* knew you?” he asked. “Who will you follow, Elegy? The person who demands you kill? Or the person you used to be?”

“I don’t know that person.”

He nodded toward the others. “That person you used to be, she inspired all of this. Everything these people have done to be free? That was her, the old Elegy.” He shrugged. “You can’t be her, but you *can* trust that she knew what she was doing. By the ideals and community she helped create.”

She slunk down, lowering her eyes. “The voice,” she said, “might come back. I feel it building, whispering at the edges of my mind. It might corrupt my heart again.”

“Then use this,” he said, taking out the sliver of sunheart Rebeke had given him. He pressed it into her chained fingers. “Keep that. If the voice returns, speak the words: ‘Bold one on the threshold of death, give this sunheart my heat that it may bless those who still live.’”

She repeated the words softly. “Why those words?”

“It will siphon off a smidge of your soul and put it into the sunheart. Not enough to power the thing, unfortunately, but your soul will naturally abandon the pieces that are less…less you, I guess. Either way, it should help keep you sane. That’s how I helped make you become more aware.”

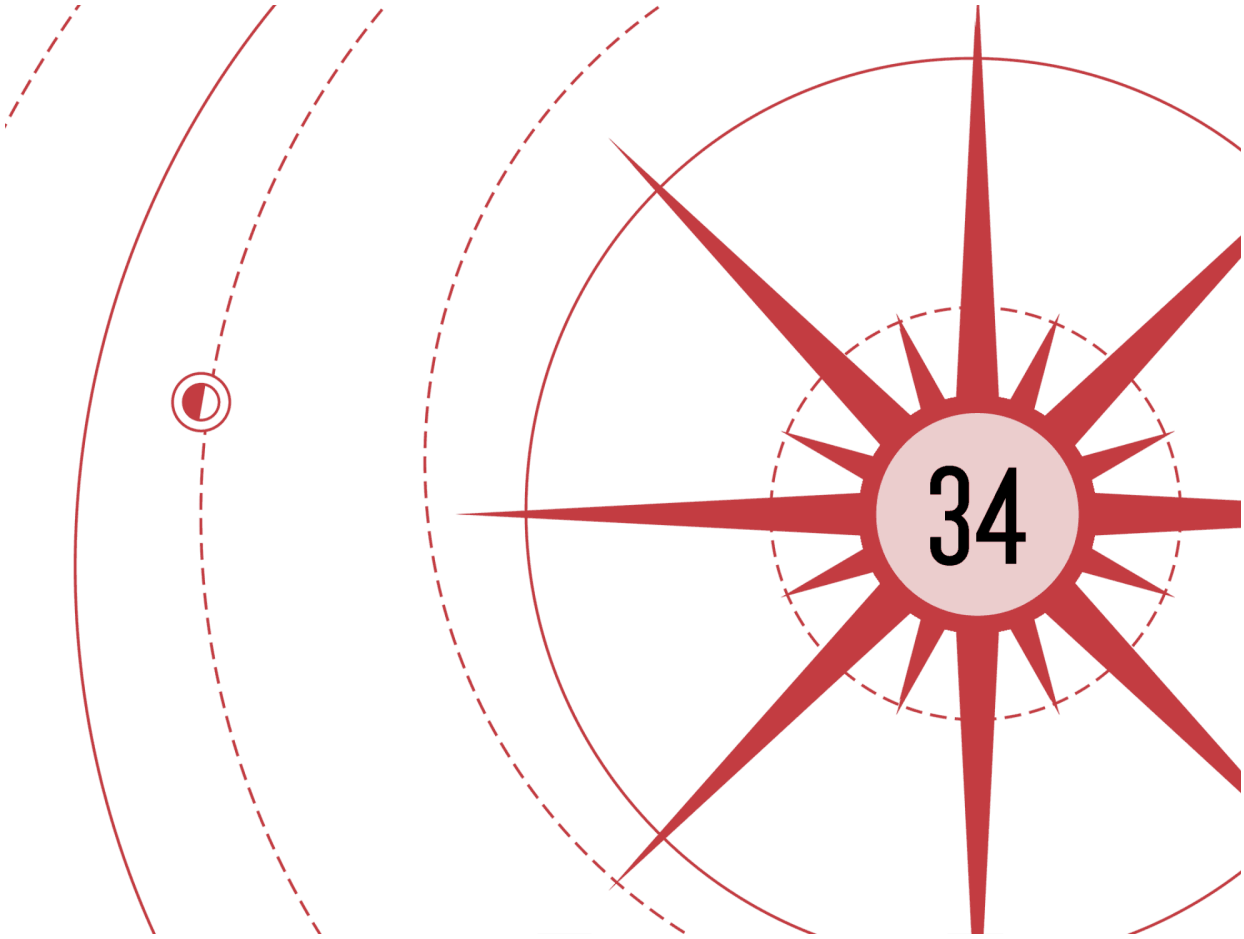
He nodded at her encouragingly, then unlocked one of the manacles. She looked at him hungrily, a certain savagery still lurking within. He smiled at her, but pointedly left the other manacle on. One hand free was the most he was comfortable giving her right now.

He left her studying that sliver of her mother’s soul. Hopefully he hadn’t somehow just handed her the power she needed to energize herself and break free in order to destroy him. Storms, he thought he’d gotten past trusting people who were that dangerous.

He walked away with a sense of dread. But—as he’d grown proficient at doing—he ignored it for now. Instead he returned to the cab because he heard thunder.

He arrived just in time to see the great maelstrom through the windshield as it broke the darkness ahead.

It was on fire.



THE SUDDEN BRIGHTNESS made him blink, his eyes watering. He kept forgetting that the Beaconites kept their lights uncommonly low, even indoors.

At first, the landscape ahead looked like a mess of undulating oranges and yellows—an abstract painting, like the Nalthians loved. Slowly, as his eyes adjusted, he made out the nuances. Most of the burning portions were below, but swirling whirlwinds of flame rose from the ground in churning, fiery vortexes. The light glowed primarily from the center of these cyclones, but where each hit the clouds, bright bursts set the very sky afire.

"It's on fire?" Nomad said. "*Why* is it on *fire*?"

"It's the great maelstrom beyond sunset!" Zeal said, crowding up into the cabin beside him. "You said you'd been in one before."

"Storms shouldn't be on fire!" Nomad exclaimed. "They're wet! Full of wind and rain."

“You suggested this plan,” Rebeke said, frowning, “and you didn’t know it would be on fire?”

He gaped at the inferno. They were still on the dark side of the planet, in night, but dangerously close to the day—now just on this side of sunset. Maybe that should have told him what he’d find, but storms. He’d heard tens of different descriptions of hell from tens of different cultures and lores. His own planet’s Damnation was a cold place, but so many others talked of eternal fire. A place where flames lashed the soul and heat melted the very fat under the flesh.

He’d never thought he’d look upon such a place. The ship turned and curved along the perimeter, flying at a slight angle to trail the storm—which retreated before them, chasing the setting sun. At least, at ground level, there didn’t seem to be many open magma vents. Indeed, he noticed something. The ground grew cool with unusual speed. Almost like…

“Something is drawing the heat away,” he whispered. “Like your bodies can draw it from one another…”

They gave him blank stares, but this seemed a likely explanation. Something about the core of the planet *was* odd. It created far more gravity than it should have for its size—so either it was incredibly dense or incredibly Invested. He suspected the latter. And now that core was drawing out that heat, cooling the ground.

That unnaturally fast cooling cracked and shattered the landscape. Releasing…

“Gases,” he guessed. “Flammable gases, as a by-product of the sun blasting the landscape. But how… Normally methane is released by decomposition, which *certainly* isn’t happening here…”

“We’re getting close to the border of the corridor,” Rebeke said, tapping a few dials that were tracking their progress. “We made good time. Beacon has maybe an hour and forty-five minutes until sunlight reaches it.”

Nomad nodded, checking the time.

“We’ll soon encounter the Cinder King’s scouts,” she continued, “unless we duck into the storm. You sure you want to do that?”

“Can this ship handle it?” he asked as a cyclone of fire sprang up beside them—a whirlwind of smoke and ash snaking down from above, then bursting aflame.

“Maybe?” Zeal said. “It has as much insulation as we could stuff in it, and some cooling mechanisms as well. That, plus the armor…well, maybe?”

“The clock is ticking,” Nomad said, and Zeal nodded. The clock, for Nomad, was always ticking. “Take us in.”

Rebeke flicked a switch—bringing up the thick blast shield to protect the windshield. She flew them in via instruments, something Nomad had never been good at doing. He much preferred flying with his hair in the wind, throttle in his fingers.

He’d foolishly anticipated a storm like at home. A darkness thick with chaos, occasionally sliced by lightning. He’d anticipated rain—which always reminded him of Roshar in the best ways. There was something comforting about the sound of water on metal or stone; it had a primal, rhythmic quality. The sound of a world’s heartbeat, racing fast with excitement.

His friends from back then had loved the wind, and he couldn’t blame them. But for Nomad, the *rain* had become his favorite manifestation of a storm. He loved stepping out in it, feeling it wash him clean.

He’d assumed, if it was raining, he could survive any storm. But here he experienced something different. The ship was buffeted and tossed, but without that comforting sound of water on the roof. This maelstrom was wrong. Like a breakdown with no tears, where you curled in the corner and struggled to contain your emotions, but somehow—despite the pain filling you to bursting—couldn’t get any of it to come out.

Dials on the dash went wild. Zeal pointed out two heat gauges—one indicating the temperature of the hull and a smaller one indicating the temperature inside of the ship. Both were rising steadily.

“We’re going to need to be quick,” Rebeke said.

“I wish we could see out there,” Nomad replied, leaning low as a whirlwind shook the ship. “We could dodge the firespouts.”

“Instruments are better,” Rebeke said. “I’m cutting us right into the Cinder King’s corridor—and the line he always makes Union follow. I’ll get us to the proper longitude, then we can use the prospector to search the region until we find something. Hopefully we can do all that before we cook ourselves.”

Nomad nodded, finding the sudden scents of scorched stone and ashen brimstone overpowering. Along with Zeal and the rest of his crew, though, he could only stand there, anxiously watching the dials rise as Rebeke flew them farther and farther into the terrible firestorm.

“Into hell itself,” he whispered.

“Hell is a forest,” Zeal mumbled back. “Full of quiet trees and unquiet dead.”

By the time Rebeke reached the proper location, the chamber was hot enough that even Nomad started to feel uncomfortable. The others must have found it torturous. Still, none of them complained. Rebeke swung low, using radar to judge the landscape and keep them from crashing. She skimmed the newborn ground with the prospecting gear—like a metal detector on the bottom of the ship, designed to find Investiture—hunting for sunhearts hidden in the earth.

At least in this case, she could avoid the worst of the cracked portions of the ground—as manifested on the radar screen. That might let them avoid the worst of the gas emissions. What if those were toxic? Nomad, with an abundance of caution, stopped breathing—but the others wouldn't have that luxury.

There, Auxiliary said. *A ping just came from the prospector controls.*

"Go back," Nomad said, trusting in Auxiliary. Even though he used Nomad's ears, he used them better. "Rebeke? Turn back. I heard something."

She glanced at him, face pouring with sweat, then nodded. Nomad glanced at the heat dials. All well into the red. Storms. She'd probably been retreating as fast as she could toward the cooler air of the shadow. Mission, in the sudden suffocating heat, forgotten.

Still, she swerved the ship back.

As they hovered over a certain spot, the faintest of pings came from the dash—nearly inaudible over the sounds of the tempest outside and the groaning of the ship's hull.

"Shades," Zeal said. "How did you hear that?"

Nomad ignored him, rushing to the door. "I'm going out. Stay close." He steeled himself, then opened the door and slipped out, slamming it shut behind him.

The sudden light of the burning sky blinded him. Fortunately no spiraling infernos were directly nearby, but his skin—despite his body's protections—immediately started to burn. And it *hurt*. Damnation!

Auxiliary forming as a spade in his hand, Nomad leaped free of the deck and toward the ground below. He hit hard, falling to his knees in what appeared to be loamy earth—but his eyes just saw a vague brownness as the heat dried them out. He glanced upward as a gust of flaming wind blew across him. He managed to blink his eyes once, and the ship was gone.

What had happened to the ship? Had it landed? Flown away? Swept farther into the storm? He couldn't tell, because right then, everything went black—his eyes failing.

Storms, Nomad. This heat is using up your strength with extreme speed. We're dropping Investiture at a frantic rate. Below five percent Skip capacity already.

Nomad grunted and started digging, pushing through the pain—which proved easier once it started to fade. That was a bad sign. It meant his skin had been burned deeply enough that the nerves were giving out. His body would draw upon its stored Investiture to stay alive—but in the face of the terrible damage being done, it focused on preserving his core systems and had given up on less essential things like nerve endings and sight.

I think, the hero says softly, this was a really, really bad idea.

Still, the ground seemed cooler than the air. Nomad gave up hunting for the sunhearts, deciding he just needed to get down and protect himself. He felt his skin flaking off, his hair burning away again.

He got down as low as he could manage, then formed Auxiliary as a large shield and positioned it between him and the sky. It was hard to tell without nerves, but he hoped that the damage to his body had been stopped. Hoped that he was no longer being actively burned to death. As long as his core organs and brain were able to keep going…

Under three percent Skip capacity.

Nomad sent a sense of quietude to Auxiliary, an indication to leave it be. He didn't need reports. Either he would live or he wouldn't.

The wind grew stronger, and he felt dirt and soil hitting his shield from above. His mind grew fuzzy, his thoughts rambling. The endless fatigue of never sleeping, of running just in front of his problems—which prowled behind him, always on the hunt and smelling blood. Exhaustion threatened to send him into a thoughtless abyss that—in his current state—might be the end.

He fought it by forcing himself to analyze the land around him. He focused, thinking, not letting himself fade away. As always, that questioning brain—that mind that had driven him to always ask, that cursed part of him that had led him to become Hoid's apprentice in the first place—wondered.

The ground *was* drawing in the heat. He was sure of it, as with the last flutters of his nerves, he could feel…*something* trying to draw his Investiture away into the depths of the planet. It couldn't claim his, but it tried.

The core of the planet fed on Investiture like he did. Was that a clue to how all of this worked? It helped explain how the dark side of the planet could exist. The weather patterns he'd expected to consume everything were

somehow quieted and stilled by this rapid cooling, creating a barrier between the dark side and the light…maybe?

But why was the sunlight so hot, and yet he'd been able to step into it on the deck of Beacon?

Was…was Nomad what they thought he was?

Storms? Was he…somehow…

No. He was no mythological hero. He'd failed these people by bullishly going forward with this plan to enter the maelstrom. The signs had been there. Auxiliary's hesitance, the others' overeager deference to his ideas. He'd already done something they'd considered impossible in cresting the mountains. But there, he'd taken the time to get the facts, the science, the data. He'd tested their engines; he'd flown a scouting mission; he'd used the knowledge of the engineers.

That plan had been hasty, but double-checked and based on a solid scientific foundation. This time, he'd picked a direction, spouted off an idea, and started running.

That had been his problem for a while. He was the man who ran. Now entombed in rock, with no way to run from himself, he confronted it. He had failed. Experience, in this case, had served him poorly.

He'd learned from wise battle commanders that in times of tension, someone making *any* decision was often better than standing around. But there was a caveat to that lesson. Pithy though it sounded, the leaders who said it were the ones who had lived long enough to pass it on. They were the ones, in the heated moments, who didn't just make decisions. They made the *right* decisions.

Their advice was good, assuming you were the type of person who judged wisely in tense situations. He did *sometimes*. This time, he'd jumped in too quickly. And he'd led the Beaconites to destruction.

He tried to feel shame at that. He really did. Instead he simply felt… numb. As if…as if he'd known this was coming, and a part of him had accepted long ago that his failures would finally catch up to him.

Pain started to prickle across his arms and legs. He was so low on Investiture, it took longer than normal to heal. Fortunately these were the easy kind of wounds to survive with his particular talents. Terrible burns didn't directly impact his core organs or his skeletal structure. The body knew what to do, and his warped soul—for all he hated the part that prevented him from defending himself—fed on Investiture to restore him, bit by bit.

His master, who had held the Dawnshard far longer, could never die. Nomad was far from that level. But today, despite excruciating pain, his body healed the burns. And as the pain receded—and he blinked restored eyes in the darkness—he realized he could hear the rain.

Honor Almighty. He could hear the rain.

"Aux?" he managed to say. "Time?"

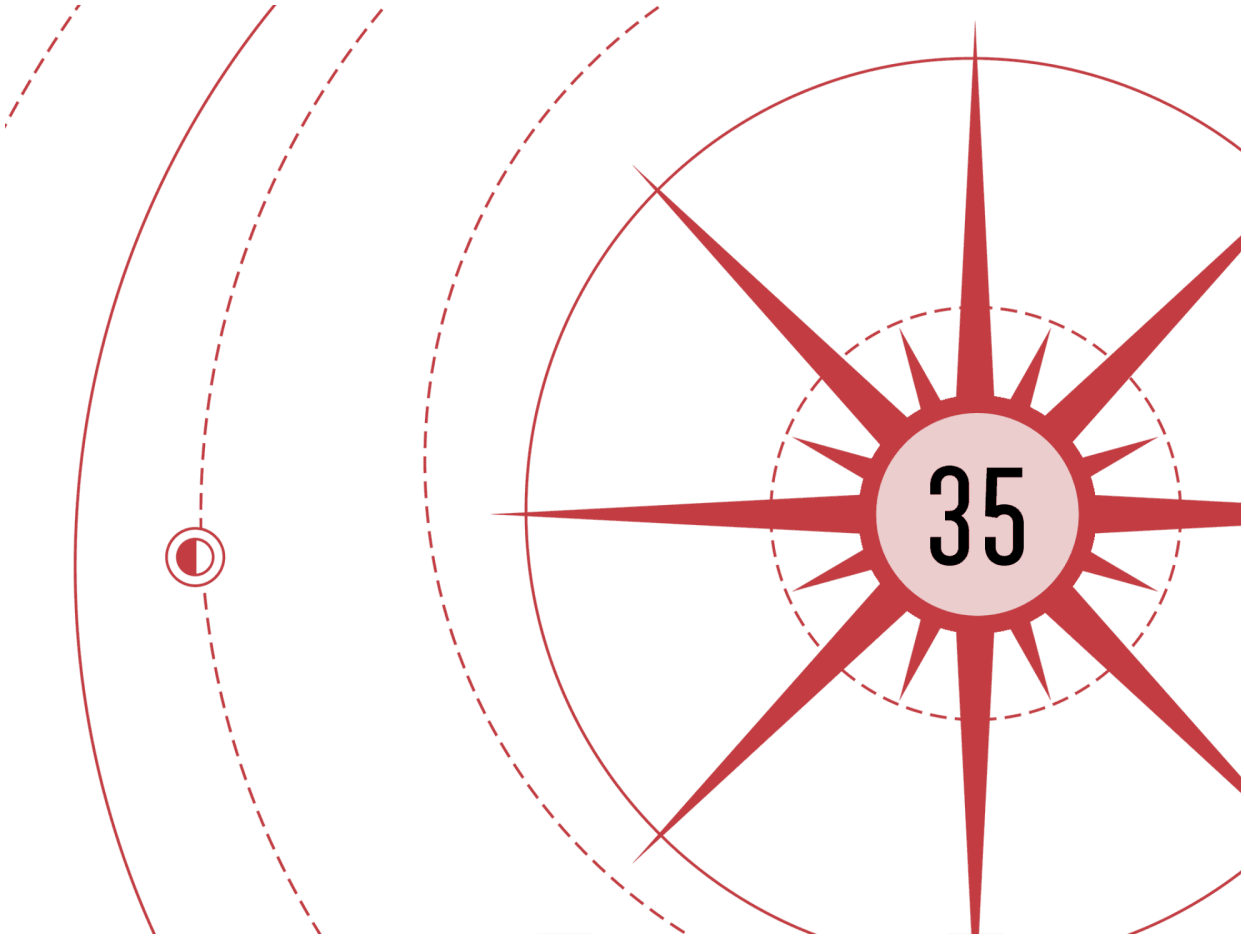
You've been buried for around fifteen minutes. There is just under an hour and a half until Beacon falls. Nomad…you have essentially no Investiture left. Maybe I can use the dregs to transform, but you have no more healing, no enhancements.

Yes, but he was back in the shadow. The planet had rotated. And the Cinder King's forces would soon arrive to harvest their sunhearts. They would bring ships he could steal. They would find the power sources, and he could take them.

He could still save Beacon. Assuming he could get back to them before the sunrise.

The race was not finished. He wasn't done running yet.

Nomad shifted, heaving upward on the shield, and broke out of the earth —healed, naked, determined.



HIS FIRST GOAL was to find a hiding place. A nearby stone arch, lit by occasional flashes of lightning from above, provided that. A place he could tuck himself away and listen to the rain whisper. He couldn't spare much time. They'd arrived in forty-five minutes, flying Elegy's relatively slow ship. He needed to be fast to return.

Unfortunately all he could do was wait.

It was the most excruciating of activities. The opposite of his personal mandate. Even when he was going backward, he was at least *moving*. But right now there was nothing else he could do, so he tried to let the rain comfort him. Envelop him. Others might hate or even fear it. But beneath its veil, he found his strength returning.

It only took two minutes. Lights appeared, bringing hope. The prospecting team who protected the Cinder King's riches. At least a dozen ships. They skimmed the area, then eventually settled down right where he'd dug himself

out. They didn't seem to notice his grave for what it was, and instead had a machine start digging into the soil.

So slow. Too slow. He watched, pained.

Ember-red light seeped from the ground, granting him an unexpected sight. Many of those present, watching the process, were Charred. Indeed, wasn't that the *Cinder King's* ship over there, landed in the mud? He was shocked to see the tyrant himself walk across the landscape, eschewing an umbrella as he approached the dig site.

Nomad doubted the king usually went on retrievals like this. He seemed wary—indeed, as his people dug out several sunhearts, the Cinder King watched the sky, looking about expectantly.

Why is he here, though? the knight asks. Why would he come out into the rain?

"He knows I'll try something," Nomad whispered. "He's expecting a fight."

How? How would he know?

Well, perhaps "know" was the wrong word. But the Cinder King obviously anticipated the worst. In this case, that meant making sure that Nomad—the wild card from another world—wasn't coming for these sunhearts.

The presence of this many troops—and the king himself—changed Nomad's plans. He couldn't fight; he still didn't know how to lance the boil on his soul. He might never figure it out. He was too much of an outsider for their local arcana to work on him.

So he needed a way to grab those sunhearts that didn't involve confrontation. A possible plan formed as a ship landed nearby, engine scorching the ground and throwing up hissing steam that made the air smell of dried mud. It was a ponderous vehicle with a large, vault-style door on the back. A worker opened it, then trotted over toward the dig, where a fourth and fifth sunheart had been laid out. Nomad couldn't grab those, but what if he waited for them to be handed to him?

Slinking through the darkness, he snuck up to the vault. Inside were several large cabinets bolted to the walls. He found room at the back to hide between them.

So…what are the chances this plan is stupid?

"Pretty good," Nomad admitted, but in this case, what planning or preparation could he do? Sometimes you really did just need to improvise, commit, and then hope. He did a cursory check of the drawers—empty. He

huddled down near the back, where he found an old sack with which to make a serviceable version of an Iriali wrap. Now somewhat clothed, he was able to form Auxiliary into a pretty good approximation of the front and top of one of the long cabinets—a prop, like a false front to a building used in films at Silverlight.

Holding this in front of himself created the illusion that he wasn't there. Anyone glancing toward the back would just see an extra-long cabinet. He hoped the extra row of drawers wouldn't be too suspicious in the darkness.

All right, the knight admits, I like this plan. It might actually work.

Nomad said nothing, waiting—again—and listening to the rain on the roof. Counting the seconds. He saw through the thin spaces in his false cabinet front when workers approached carrying bright sunhearts.

"Don't see why he's here looking over our shoulders," one of the workers hissed. "And with Charred too. Does he think we're suddenly going to start stealing from him?"

"Best not to question," another voice said. "Don't give him any reason to pay attention to you. We're going to run out of captives soon, now that Beacon is gone."

The lights vanished one by one as they were put into drawers. Storms. They'd better not try to open one of *his* drawers. They'd fill the ones at the front first, right?

That's what they did. Storing the sunhearts, then retreating—their voices suddenly cut off as a loud *thump* shook the chamber. Nomad stood up from his hiding place and dismissed Auxiliary. That thump had been the vault door closing. He rushed to the drawers, and though they were locked individually, a crowbar made quick work of that.

The sunhearts were inside. One per drawer. He collected all he could find—five in total. That would be enough for Beacon, wouldn't it? Feeling relieved, he tucked them into another sack, then went to the vault door.

Which was locked. He stared at it, feeling foolish.

Uh, I don't think a crowbar will help with that, Nomad.

"We might need something sharper," Nomad said, holding his hand to the side.

I…don't think I can do that.

"You did it before," he said. "When we were underneath the city. You severed the bolts."

You did that, Nomad. It's not my soul that is cankered, not my oaths that have been broken. You are the one who can't harm anyone. You are the one

who can't form a weapon meant only for killing.

This wouldn't be only for killing. He just needed to slice through the metal of this door. He tried to recreate the mental state he'd been in when he'd cut those latches. Surely this moment was equally urgent.

But he was tired. And uncertain of himself. Beyond that, he could feel the canker on his soul growing stronger. Pushing against it was as futile as trying to break down this vault door with his fists. He struggled for a few minutes, then leaned forward, eyes squeezed closed, forehead against the door.

What was he doing? If he escaped the vault with these sunhearts, then what? Did he really think he was going to be able to steal a ship without getting into a fight? And even if he did, could he find his way back to Beacon on his own? He'd only flown ships from the city, which had the proper authentication devices. If he stole a Union ship, he'd be as blind as they were.

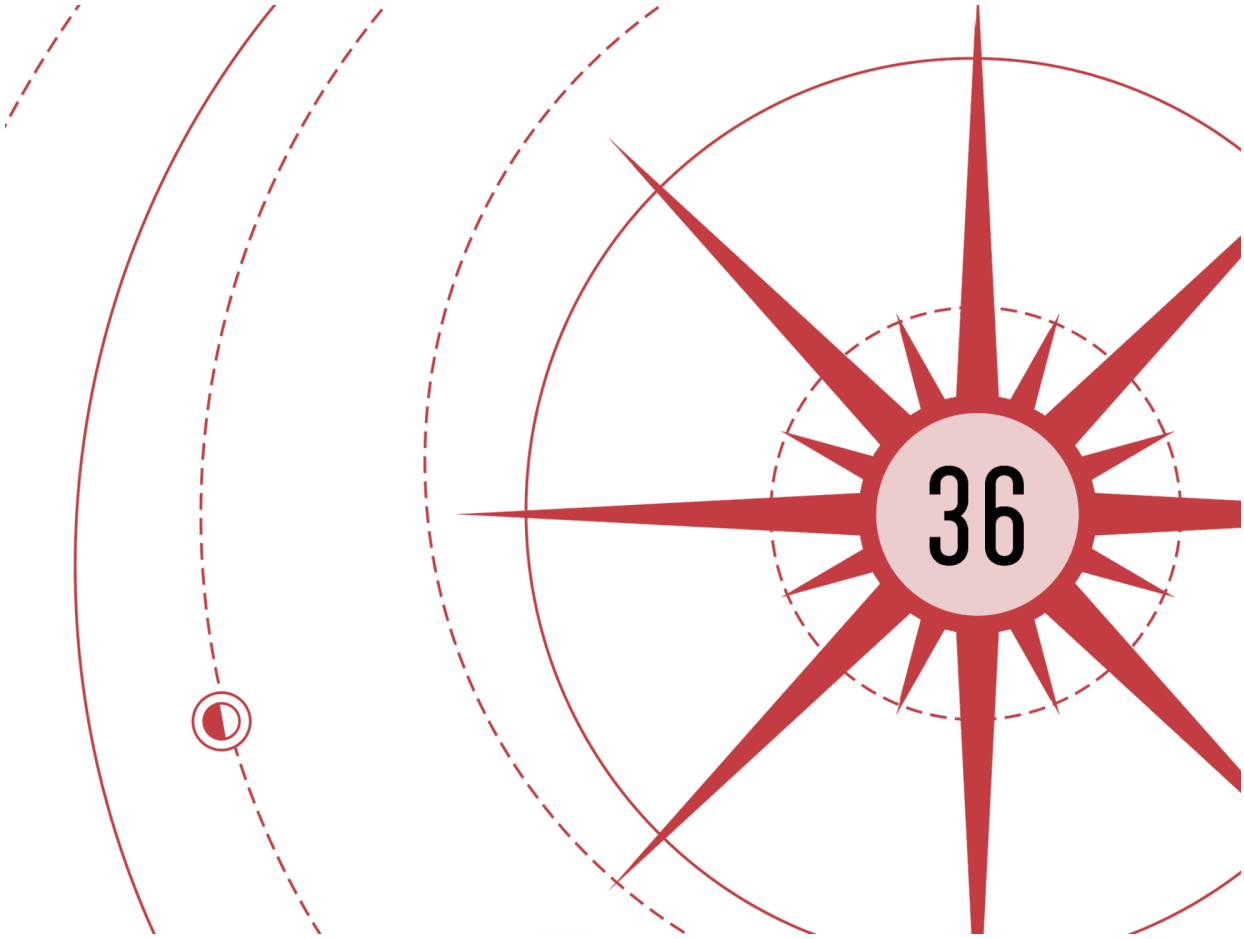
He…didn't know anymore. He was stuck. Not just in his running. He'd… he'd been stopped for some time. Stagnant. Always focused on the run, but never focused on the greater issues. The ones deep inside him.

He was frozen. His soul. His self. Running farther wasn't going to fix that. Regardless of what he told himself.

Click.

The vault door? For a moment, he thought his introspection had somehow influenced that. Then, with a panicked spike of alarm, he realized that someone was opening it from the outside. He scrambled back to restore his camouflage but was too late. The door swung open.

Revealing Zeal, standing alone in the mud.



ZEAL?

Zeal!

The small man was muddy up to his thighs, but he'd apparently survived the storm unscathed. He tucked away a set of lockpicks, glanced behind himself, started at a sound, then moved to climb into the vault.

It's Zeal, the knight says with unabating enthusiasm. Storms, I don't think I've ever been this happy to see someone breaking and entering.

"Zeal!" Nomad said, causing the man to stop in place, squint—then let out a huge sigh of relief.

"Sunlit?" he asked. "You blessed man. You *survived*?"

"I did," Nomad said, stepping forward with the sack of sunhearts. "Looks like you and I had the same plan."

Zeal peered into the sack, then up at Nomad with a grin on his face. "I…I can't believe you." He put a muddy hand to his head. "And here I thought *I* was saving the city. You had it all in hand, even after we abandoned you."

"I doubt you had a choice."

"We didn't, but—" He froze, hearing voices outside. He nodded to the side. "Maybe we catch up later? We've got about an hour left to save Beacon—which is going to be tight, with a forty-five-minute flight back at best, depending on the wind."

Nomad nodded, jumping out into the mud. An argument was going on in the near distance, where several of the Cinder King's officials were growing increasingly agitated. Apparently one thought that twelve people had been left here as tribute to the sun, while the other thought there had only been eleven.

Nomad followed Zeal out to the right, into the darkness. "Did you actually *steal* one of their scout ships?" he whispered.

"No," Zeal said. "Didn't have the wherewithal for that. I grabbed the controls after Rebeke collapsed from heat exhaustion; I barely got us back to the shadow before we all burned up. Rest of the team is out—either unconscious or throwing up all over the cab. Once we get back, I'd hold my breath if I were you.

"I was the only one still hale, though Rebeke seemed to be recovering faster than the others. Still…well, I decided there was only one option. I had to grab the sunhearts myself. With fresh ones for power, we can maybe push the ship faster going back. It's a hope, at least.

"So I landed and watched for lights in the darkness. I followed them while running dark, then snuck out and prayed to Adonalsium that I'd be able to manage on my own." He shook his head, the movement made barely visible by the rolling lightning in the clouds. "And there you were. Already in the vault. I doubted you, Sunlit. I'm sorry."

"No, Zeal," he said. "I—"

Nomad. Someone's following us.

He stopped in place, turning. Two burning eyes pierced the darkness behind them, illuminating the smiling face of a man walking at an even pace.

"Run, Zeal," Nomad said.

The other man gasped, then obeyed. Nomad stayed in place, meeting those eyes.

"Guards!" the Cinder King shouted. "Charred! They are here! Come, stop them!"

The shout was accompanied by thunder. But the man didn't seem too alarmed, despite his shout. He stepped forward, toward Nomad, and spoke in a calmer voice.

“I knew you’d come,” the man said. “Call it…*faith*. That the true killer could not be defeated so easily. You wouldn’t fall with a whimper in a city trapped on the slopes. You’re meant to die in battle, offworlder. In battle with me.”

Nomad stepped forward, as if to face off with the Cinder King right there. And he really wished he could. He’d stuff those burning eyes into the muddy water until they went out.

Instead he tried to keep the man talking, figure out his fatal flaw—something Nomad could use against him. Charred rushed by on both sides, chasing poor Zeal. Nomad kept his attention on their lord.

“You like being strong,” Nomad said. “You like having power over others.”

“All life,” the man said, “is *about* having power over others. Wealth? It’s about making others do the work you don’t want to do. Strength? It’s the ability to push back harder than those who would push you. Religion?” His smile deepened. “Do men from your world really become gods?”

“You are fixated on me,” Nomad said, stepping forward. “You need to know if you are stronger than I am. Why? You already killed an offworlder…” Nomad narrowed his eyes. “No, you lied, didn’t you? You found that other offworlder as a corpse. And you’ve wondered ever since, were they stronger than you?”

“Of course I am the stronger one,” the Cinder King said, putting his hands out to the sides. “I’m alive. I didn’t lie; I found your kin—sick, not dead—but I’m stronger. After all, they’re now ashes. I have the sunheart to prove it.”

Sunheart.

Damnation. Nomad really *was* an idiot.

He got close enough to the Cinder King that the other man slid a sword from the sheath at his side, grinning at the prospect of a duel.

Then Nomad started running.

Right past the man, who cried out and gave chase—but Nomad was faster. He dashed through the mud and lightning, rain spraying against his face, wind whipping at the makeshift garment he’d tied at his waist. He sped straight for the Cinder King’s ship, then leaped up to grab the cold metal lip of the deck. He pulled himself up and shoved into the cab of the ship, racing through it to the cabin filled with trophies.

“Face me!” the Cinder King shouted behind him. “I am giving you the honor of doing so!”

Ignoring him, Nomad smashed through the glass on the display case and seized the tiny sunheart on the shelf there. It was the size of a pebble and glowing very faintly.

When he'd first talked to the Cinder King in this room, he'd been shown the book carried by the person whose soul now lay in his hand. A person from Nomad's homeworld.

This soul…he shared a bond with it. Would that be enough? He whispered the words of the prayer in Alethi. "Bold soul past the threshold of death, take into you my heat, that I may bless those who still live. *Please.*"

He felt a sudden cooling in his palm. Heat being pulled from within him.

It's working? Auxiliary asked. *Storms, it's working.*

Nomad turned as the Cinder King stumbled into the doorway. He thought of punching the man, and his body started to lock up. The sunheart might be working as he'd hoped, but he wasn't ready yet. So Nomad gave the king a grin, then leaped back into the pilot's cab and smashed out the front windshield—recently replaced from his last escape. Fortunately for him, they had done a poor job of it.

"Fine!" the Cinder King shouted at him. "A coward, then? If my Charred kill you, that will still prove what needs to be proven. You hear me, offworlder?"

Nomad vaulted off the deck, then went scrambling through the mud back the way he had come. Lightning in the darkness showed him a worrisome sight—the ship, Elegy's ship, still in the mud in the distance. Zeal hadn't taken off yet, and Charred—tens of them—were climbing all over the thing.

Like most of the ships he'd seen here, this one was shaped kind of like an old naval boat—with a cab at back and a wide deck at the front. Railings rimmed the entire thing, and the Charred were crawling up the sides, onto the deck, assaulting the bulbous structure at the back.

Nomad arrived and, with a powerful bound, hauled himself up onto the front deck. He glanced toward the cab and found that the blast shield was hanging off, melted and warped. Through the window beyond, he saw Zeal and Rebeke desperately holding the back door closed against a group of Charred on the other side.

On the deck with Nomad, a familiar Charred—the one with the streaks across his face, like a fire poker had been taken to his cheeks—turned away from where he'd cracked the windshield with his truncheon. He saw Nomad and smiled broadly. He stepped forward, perhaps anticipating another easy fight.

With a concerted effort, Nomad formed a fist around the small, offworld sunheart—feeling it leech away heat from him. It tore at the crust on his soul. The Torment gave him some boons, and he wouldn't want to be completely rid of it. But a little skimming off the top and…

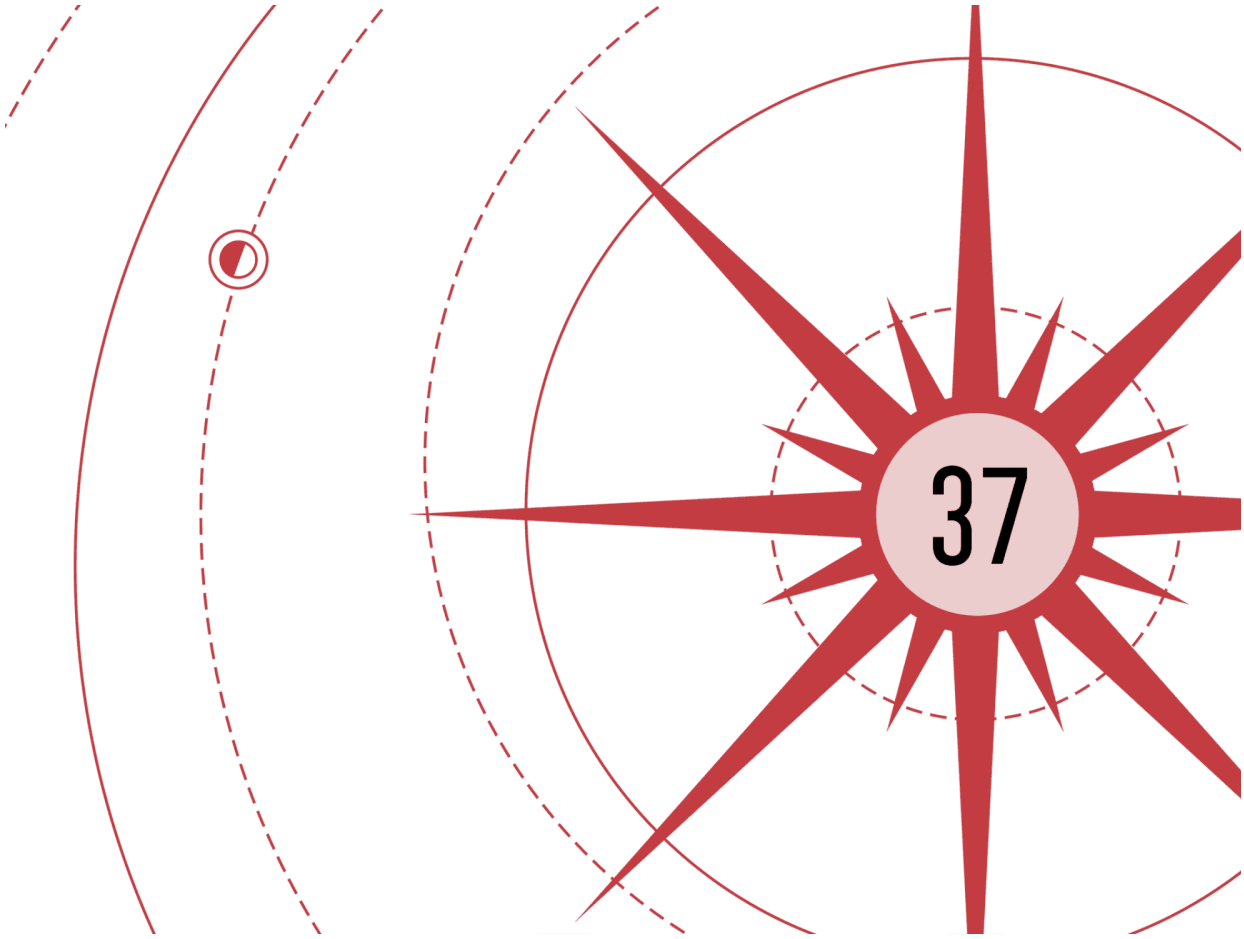
The Charred rushed him.

And Nomad—crashing through the numbness that tried to stop him—slammed his fist into the creature's gut. The Charred let out an *oof* as Nomad tossed him back against the ship's windshield.

Almost as one, the Charred who had been climbing or trying to break in turned toward him, rainwater dripping from their pale skin, their stone hearts glowing.

Lightning splintered the sky as Nomad raised that glorious fist before himself. Wit would have appreciated the dramatic moment. Nomad just grinned.

"Storms, yes," he whispered. "*Finally.*"



THE CHARRED CLAMBERING onto the deck howled and shouted at him, which served—beautifully—to draw the attention of the ones inside the ship. They left the door to the cockpit that Zeal and Rebeke had been defending, and piled out to join their fellows on the deck—as they had just found a far more engaging fight.

Nomad tried to form a spear but felt resistance in the action—his soul was still being lanced, and some remnants of the canker remained. Instead he held his hands forward and formed a simple bo staff—a length of silvery metal six feet long. For some reason, leaving the spearhead off made it work, and he cocked a smile—remembering a similar story told to him by a friend from long ago.

He made a hole in the haft the proper size, then slid the offworlder's sunheart inside so he could touch it while holding the weapon. As he did, Auxiliary oohed—which was distinctively amusing in his monotone.

I can feel the power of that sunheart growing, the knight says. I…I might be able to draw upon the Investiture you are putting into it. Why? I can't use the power of the canker on your soul.

"Filtered and purified, maybe," he said, raising his staff. "Not really the time to ponder it."

This will give you a few hundred BEUs. Use them well.

He'd need to. Some twenty Charred—crawling up over the side of the ship or scrambling out from inside the cab—surrounded him. Even the one he'd punched earlier stood up, his cinderheart flaring with passion.

Twenty to one. Bad odds, even for one such as him. Still, he launched into the first group of them, determined to keep as much open space around himself as possible. His worst danger here was getting pulled down, smothered, overwhelmed. Hopefully they'd underestimate him. Either way, to win against such superior numbers, his best option was to hit quickly, hit repeatedly, and keep the enemy uncertain.

Fortunately, if there was one lesson he'd learned well over the years, it was how to keep moving.

He crashed among the Charred, throwing several of them back. Glowing cinderhearts lit the deck like a fading midnight campfire—washed out occasionally by white lightning from above. Three swung batons, which Nomad expertly deflected, his muscles—and soul—as eager for this as he was. He slammed one behind the knee with the bottom of his staff—sending her sliding to the deck in the rain—then shoved aside another before stepping back and swinging the end of the staff up with the force of a man who had been held back too long.

Lightning flashed as he hooked the third Charred under the chin with enough power to send him into the air—teeth exploding from his mouth when lower jaw met top.

Nomad spun directly into the next batch, rainwater spraying from his arms as he swept around—dropping the staff and dismissing it while snatching the sunheart out of the air—and formed a shield that blocked the next three attacks. He heaved forward—hurling them back—then dropped the shield just in time to form another staff and come in swinging at the woman he'd tripped earlier.

He hit her with the force of a thunderclap, sending her soaring off the deck, spraying water.

Another swing sent a Charred to the deck, skull cracking against the steel.

His next attack dropped three at once with a sweep to the legs.

The next broke an arm, forcing the Charred to drop her weapon and howl in pain as Nomad sent the woman into a pile of her companions with a swift kick.

He was the rain, suddenly freed from the cloud and cast into the sky. He was the lightning, so eager to move that it jumped through empty space with frenzied splintering. He was the thunder that hit when you weren't expecting it, warping the air with its rhythms. He was the storm. Falling on foreign lands, but still the same as it had always been.

He threw Charred aside like dolls. He shattered bones, dropped people off the side into the mud, flung them out in the rain. On this world, they were elite warriors—but this was a planet where men did not train for battle, and it had *never* seen anything like him before.

The cab, Nomad, Auxiliary said—watching out for him, even as Nomad was using his carcass as a weapon. One Charred, sneakier than the rest, had slipped through to the cockpit while Zeal and Rebeke watched Nomad fight.

As the creature reared up behind them—the glow from its chest bloodying the chamber—Nomad skidded up outside. Then—with a firm demand—he gave the order.

Spear!

A glittering spearhead etched with patterns from his homeland formed from mist on the end of the staff just as he rammed it right through the windshield, sending the spear into the cinderheart of the Charred inside.

The cinderheart cracked. The light went out. The creature's eyes burned, each giving off a puff of dark smoke as the body collapsed backward.

The Charred who had been battling on the deck all froze. That gave Nomad enough of a breather to see the stunned Rebeke and Zeal gaping at him. They belatedly turned toward the dead Charred behind them, then looked back at him with expressions that were somehow even *more* amazed.

Nomad, Auxiliary said, *you're flirting with low levels of Investiture. You haven't had a chance to fully regain your enhanced strength and endurance. You can't defeat all of these creatures.*

Unfortunately there was truth to that. The Charred, now wary, were getting up. Gathering themselves and healing. They might not be trained, but they *were* strongly Invested, while he was running on fumes. Their next assault wouldn't underestimate him so soundly.

Nomad reached in and whipped the spear back, then raised his hands—one holding the spear—toward Zeal in a gesture that Nomad considered the

universal symbol for, “What the hell?” He then waved his hand upward, to indicate they should take off.

Zeal cringed and nodded, going for the controls. Nomad turned toward the remaining Charred, gathered hesitantly at the bow of the small deck. Their caution told him they could still feel fear. The Cinder King’s control wasn’t absolute.

It does make me feel guilty, the knight notes, that we have to treat them like this. They’re victims too.

It was truth, but one that Nomad had long ago made peace with. You didn’t always get to fight the right people. In fact, you often had to fight the wrong ones—at least until you could stop the men and women who gave the orders.

Perhaps there was another option today. He fell into a stance, spear at the ready. Then, to the beat of thunder and the applause of lightning, he began spinning and twisting, moving his spear through an intimidating set of training maneuvers.

They called it the Chasm Kata. The very first he’d ever seen, and he knew firsthand how intimidating it looked. Stepping forward with each twist of the spear, each foot hitting like a drumbeat—solid and firm despite the slick surface. The spear spun so fast, it reflected nearby cinderhearts almost like a mirror. Battering back the rain, an extension of himself—flipping, spinning, then lunging for a split second. Like frozen lightning.

Then motion again, ever advancing, step after inevitable step. Forward toward the watching Charred, who—with unconscious alarm—pulled back. They huddled against the railing of the bow, and behind them—hovering close on his own ship—Nomad saw a pair of glowing eyes in the darkness. The Cinder King, watching. Awed. Maybe even scared.

Yes… Nomad could see it was true, for the Cinder King’s terror was manifest on the horrified faces of the Charred to whom he was linked. The man was realizing how lucky he was that Nomad hadn’t agreed to duel him. He was realizing exactly how dead he would be if the fight had come to him.

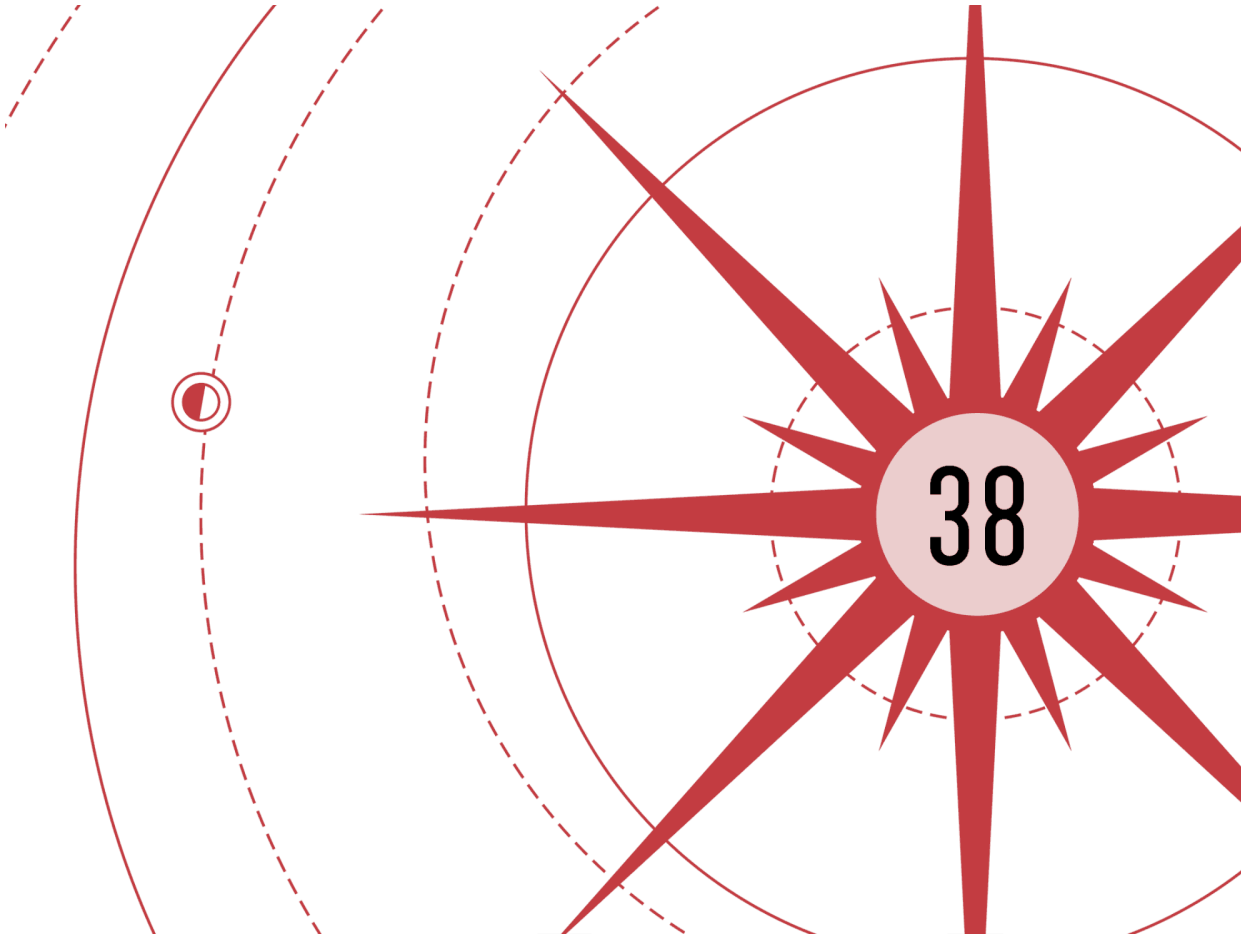
Nomad came to the final spin and step, planting his feet, spear fully extended so that it nearly touched the closest Charred. Then he swept backward into a standing position, dismissing the spear and catching the little offworlder sunheart in one hand. He arranged his arms in a cross pattern, wrists touching, and softly mouthed the words.

“Bridge Four.”

They couldn’t know the weight those words had for him. But the entire display—with the dead Charred behind him in the cab and the ship finally taking off—was enough. The surviving Charred scrambled off the ship, fleeing before him, dropping to the mud below.

He suspected they’d never have broken like that if the Cinder King hadn’t been there, watching and realizing with horror what he’d almost encountered.

Or perhaps Nomad was just projecting emotions onto the man. He was too distant now to make out his expression. Regardless, as they fled into the night with the sunhearts, no one gave pursuit.



THEY CALLED HER ELEGY.

The captive Charred continued to mull over that name as the ship soared back toward Beacon. She'd watched the killer's display on the deck, though her view had been partially obstructed. She'd had to lean to the side, look out through the open door between rooms, past the two people at the controls, through the windshield, into the darkness.

She'd watched him fight, and had hungered.

That. She wanted *that*.

She could not be Elegy again. She did like the name; the part of her that knew words understood what it meant. A song for the dead. And she was dead. It fit.

Elegy. She would be Elegy. Not the *same* Elegy, but different people could have the same name.

The killer stepped through the door and closed it behind him, soaking wet, bare-chested. She felt as if he should have a cinderheart glowing there. It

was wrong that he didn't. One did not fight as he did without a cinderheart.

Yet he had. And far, *far* better than the Charred.

She wanted that.

He had told her she should live for something. She had just seen that he was right. The rest of the Charred, they'd fought like children, like bullies with no training. He had fought with the grace of the wind itself, fully in control, channeling his anger and his *frenzy* into his smooth motions.

A weapon was far, far more dangerous when the tip was sharp. When you could put all your force into that single point. And her anger, her desire to fight and move and do and act and kill and strain and struggle… All of that would be *far* more dangerous if she could channel it into a single point as well.

That was why he'd won. The Charred were bludgeoning weapons, while he was a spear.

The woman stepped out of the cab. The one they called Rebeke, Elegy's sister. She met the killer, then pulled back, as if before a bonfire. She clasped her gloved hands before her and stood in place.

"That was incredible," Rebeke whispered. "It was also terrible. So terrible."

"The art and butchery of the spear," he said. "I know. Zeal, you should call in that we're on our way!"

"Already raising them," he called. "We had to escape the bubble of the Cinder King's ships. They had a radio jammer in place."

Rebeke went to help care for the four others, who had been knocked out in the heat and were only now recovering. They were weaker than Elegy was. So she didn't bother with them.

A moment later, a voice came from the cockpit. Elegy tilted her head back —as if not alive with constant energy trying to make her move—and listened. She had to learn to listen. Had to learn to control it.

Only then could she fight as he had.

"Zeal?" a woman's voice said over the radio. One of the old ones who led. "Oh, praise Adonalsium. Did you get them?"

"Five sunhearts," he said. "They're sitting in a sack right next to me, Confidence. We're on our way."

"How long?" The old woman sounded scared.

Elegy hadn't understood fear until just now, when she'd felt it along with the other Charred. Because she'd lied to the killer. Though she no longer

heard the voice, she *could* still feel the Cinder King. His emotions, which had—just now—included fear.

"I beg a moment as I calculate our course," Zeal said. "How…how are you all?"

"The sun continues to advance, and our opportunities to outrun it diminish. There is a corridor of darkness, the peak of the mountains touching the shadow. Alas, it vanishes quickly. Two of our ships are beyond repair. We've moved everyone onto the remaining eight, but there is not room for them all inside, so some sit upon the decks. Waiting."

"We'll have the sunhearts divided into parts by the time we arrive," Zeal said. "Have everyone ready to go. We'll be there in…a little over half an hour. Hopefully."

"May you outrun the sun, Zeal," the old woman whispered.

Rebeke took out her knife to divide the sunhearts, and the killer stepped up to her. "Can you spare one of those for me?" he asked.

She stared at him, then at the stolen sunhearts, clearly mentally calculating what Beacon would need. She met his eyes and nodded, handing a full sunheart to the killer. He walked away, holding it up near his face. Then the light of it faded, and his eyes seemed to glow for a moment.

He did have his own cinderheart inside. It simply wasn't visible.

"I watched you fight," Elegy whispered as he settled down nearby.

He glanced at her.

"I want that," she said. "I want to do what you did. I want to be able to *kill* like you killed."

He thought for a bit before speaking. "I'd hoped," he said, "that spending time with your sister, with this people, would make you start to want the things they have. Not the things I do. The old Elegy—"

"I'm not her," Elegy cut in. "I can never *be* her. I want to learn battle like you do it. You said that I need to focus on something, deliberately. I have chosen."

"You'll need control," he said, "for my kind of fighting."

"I figured that out already," she said. "I know it. But how? How did you learn?"

"Slowly," he said, leaning back against the wall, eyes closed. "Step by step, Elegy."

"I don't understand."

"When I was first given a spear," he said, "I didn't know how to hold it. I didn't even know how to *stand*. Each time I sparred, I had to dedicate all my

thoughts to standing correctly. The more I did it, the more natural that stance became. It's like…I didn't just learn the lesson, I internalized it. That left my conscious mind free to think about something else. Since my body now stood properly on its own, I could wonder about how I held the spear.

"Then *that* grip became natural, so I could focus on thrusting with precision. I could learn to change my grip, resetting my stance so that I was oriented toward the enemy. Each of these things slowly became instinct. Through deliberate practice—to learn that *specific* thing. And each time, once internalized, that left my mind free to try something else. To be honest, though, I had a huge advantage over most people on this path."

"You had teachers?" she asked.

"No. I could survive mistakes." Looking weary, he opened his eyes. "I got Invested, like you. It came to me via some oaths I made and a bond to a being of pure Investiture. Like that rock at your core, but with a worse sense of humor."

She thought she heard something then, as she sometimes did around him. A different voice that seemed to say…a joke?

"My Investiture let me survive wounds I shouldn't have," he continued, "and learn from my mistakes in a way that is exceptionally difficult to do as a soldier. Normally you end up dead, and all your learning evaporates like rainwater in the sunlight.

"But *I* could learn, keep growing, until…" He held his hands out to the sides. "Until I became what you see. A mess of a man sometimes, but one with instincts for battle honed over decades."

"I want it," she whispered.

"I suppose that will do," he said, then reached up—as if to let her out of her last manacle.

She immediately felt her eagerness growing. The heat from inside her cinderheart spreading through her body. The thirst for the fight energizing her.

"No," she forced herself to say, making him hesitate.

"Why?" he asked.

"If you set me free," she said, "I *will* attack you. All of you. I feel it." She paused though, feeling… *Feeling.* Feeling something other than the heat. "But that is progress, isn't it? That I spoke to you of it?"

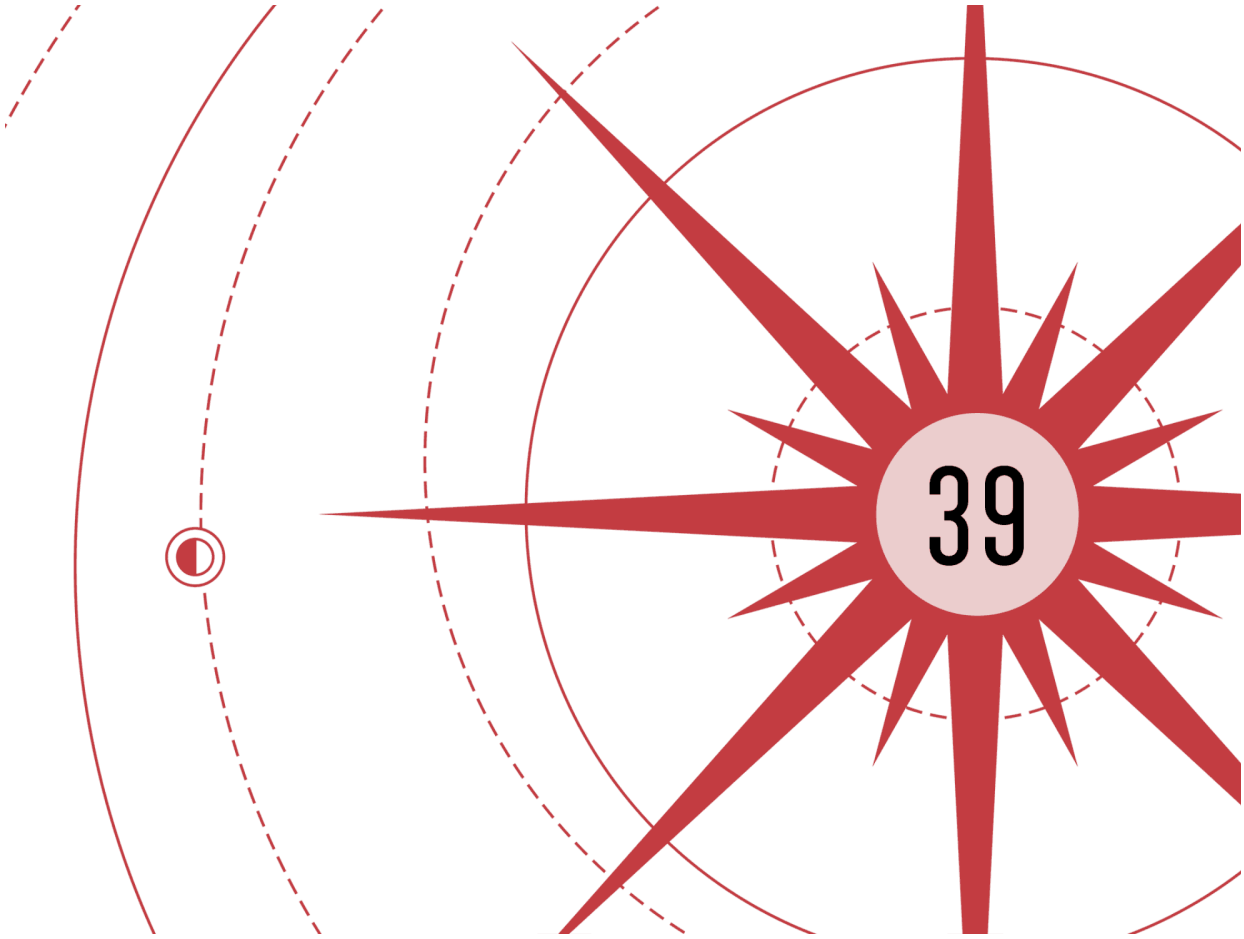
"I'll take it as such," he said, nodding and leaning away from her bond. "Thanks for the warning. But you're going to have to learn to control it. If you don't, you'll never learn anything else."

“I can fight,” she said, “even with that heat.”

He shook his head. “It’s not enough just to fight, Elegy. Those other Charred, they could be left in a pit to fight for centuries, and they’d barely learn anything. You must choose to practice. Choose to learn.” He met her eyes. “Choose to control it.”

She nodded slowly, then settled back, thinking. Until they neared the place where the ships had crashed.

Where it was growing dangerously bright.



EIGHT PEOPLE MET the *Dawnchaser*, one for each of the remaining ships of Beacon. They went running as soon as they were tossed their chunk of sunheart.

Nomad stood on the deck, looking up, sweat running down his brow. The peaks of the mountains above looked aflame. Indeed, they probably *were* on fire. The pounding sunlight just on the other side of those peaks was liquifying the stone.

He stepped back as he saw something shoot up on the other side, visible even at this great distance. A jet of magma, reaching high past the atmosphere. Like a sunspot.

Storms. He'd thought he possessed a basic understanding of geology, despite needing a crash course in tectonics after leaving his homeworld. But he had *no idea* what would cause mountains to spring up anew with each passing of the sun, after they were melted down into nothing.

Rebeke dashed up to the ship and nodded to him before climbing into the cockpit. She had to shove past the people they'd crammed in there, now that two more ships had to be left behind.

Rebeke's return meant that the convoy was ready. She lifted the *Dawnchaser* off, looking out through a windshield that still had a spear hole in it.

Nomad remained on the deck, not wanting to deal with the packed interior. Plus, out here, he could feel the wind, cold against his scalp. His hair wouldn't grow back until he had more Investiture to spare. At least he'd been given some trousers, a belt, and a buttoned shirt. He'd left the collar undone.

He leaned out, hands on the railing, watching the other eight ships lift off—leaving two broken ones at the foot of the mountain. Together, they fled with everything they had left. He turned, glancing toward the other horizon. He thought he could see the darkness of the shadow ahead—the dark side of the planet—but he wasn't certain.

It was a race of a very specific kind. They could move far faster than the sun would rise, but they weren't just trying to outrun it. Right now, they were within a pool of darkness in the shape of a mountain. Like the shadow of a tree on a sunny morning, stretching long at first—but shrinking as the sun climbed the sky.

Would they be able to run the length of that shadow and escape into the night? Or would they get to the edge, only to find a fiery gap between them and safety? Ever widening, driving them back, until they were destroyed as the last shade vanished?

It was going to be close. He could read it in the way the convoy pushed their engines to their utmost, despite the recent slapdash repairs. There wasn't time to coddle the machines. If something went wrong, they died. They might die anyway. So they pushed, burning away the very souls of their deceased loved ones in a mad rush toward safety.

He witnessed it from the lead ship. Elegy's vessel, though a bulbous exploring machine, was still faster than the large transports behind. Rebeke slowed her ship to stay with the others—but then sped up, likely after being chewed out for delaying. Compassion herself had insisted all the ships fly at their best speed and not slow if others had troubles.

Right now, they had to pray, flee, and hold firm. Compassion, in this context, had to be about the survival of their people.

That last one, the knight says, is a lot slower than the rest…

Nomad could just barely make out what he meant. Far down the line, the final ship was struggling. It wasn't the one with the Chorus; that was near the middle of the pack. Instead it was the bulky water tower ship, now packed with people—a number of them huddled outside, on the deck.

Nomad looked up at the ridge, which glowed like a crown. Then the tips of the peaks began to melt, magma pouring down the back side.

Nomad, I feel something, Auxiliary said. *Do you feel that? What is it?*

"I don't know what you…"

He trailed off as he saw it in the air beside him. A small fracture, a misalignment—like how a broken mirror might reflect a disjointed image. It floated beside his head, the size of a fingernail. There was something familiar about it.

"It's one of my fragments," he whispered. "A piece of my armor. You said those were dead!"

I thought they were gone, consumed.

Why was it back now? What had happened?

Was it because he fought again?

Was it because of *why* he had fought again?

He turned back down the line of terrified ships. That last one had fallen farther behind.

"Aux," he asked. "How much do we have?"

Roughly six percent Skip capacity. Just over your strength threshold.

"Enough, though," he whispered. "Maybe enough?"

For what?

Nomad dashed forward and leaped. He soared above a washed-out mudscape, air tugging at him—as if to cradle him—until he slammed down on the deck of the ship next in line. He ran across this as the people at the sides cried out.

Ahead, light began to break around the peaks, like floodwaters through a failing dam. He vaulted himself again, into the arms of the wind, and landed on the top of the Chorus's ship.

He ran. Ran *toward* the sun, soaring, landing, bounding along the line of ships until he reached the next to last one—and looked across a much wider gap between it and the final straggler. People on deck backed away, watching him with awe as he took a breath, then *ran* for everything he had and threw himself into the sky.

He hung there, locking gaze with the looming dawn, until he hit the final deck and rolled. He came up with gritted teeth, dashing for the back of the

ship, passing terrified people. As he arrived, he manifested Auxiliary as a shield.

"Bigger, Aux," he growled.

How big?

"Bigger! Use it all!"

The sun finally crested the rise. And Auxiliary burned away Nomad's Investiture, growing.

Light exploded around them, the force of it beating against the shield, driving him backward—but Auxiliary, using the power of that sunheart, had grown truly large. Big as a building, big enough to shelter the entire ship.

The blazing fire of an angry sun washed over the shield. It set the air ablaze at the sides, as if Nomad were standing with shield braced not against mere light—but against the flaming breath spat by some fearsome beast of lore. The shield remained secure, and Nomad held it in place, grunting at the force of the solar fury. Sweating, he put his shoulder against it, and looked back to see the wide-eyed people. Surprised to be surviving their very first dawn.

A second later, the ship passed into the shadows and the heat vanished. Nomad dismissed the shield and slumped against the railing, dumbfounded by a sudden flood of exhaustion. He felt numb, he felt cold, he felt…

Normal.

Storms. This was what it was like to be without even a single drop of Investiture. It had been a very, very long time.

I can't believe that worked, the knight whispers with boundless shock and enthusiasm.

Nomad shook his head, lying back on the deck, feeling weak. Unaware of his surroundings. Tired. The weight of years and years pressing against him.

I felt something from that light, Auxiliary said. *Something very unusual. Did you sense the force of it? Light shouldn't push like that, Nomad.*

"It was being pulled into the ground," Nomad whispered. "Like…an electric current. Like lightning, forming a current between cloud and ground—only this time, between sunlight and the core of the planet."

Storms. That was it. That's why he could stand on the deck up high and not be aflame. Because he hadn't been between the sun and the planet. That was why sunhearts were charged so much as they were made. That was why the ground melted.

Everything between the sun and the core…it acted like the filament of an incandescent light bulb. Superheated by the transfer of energy.

Something roused him from his stupor. Were those…

Cheers?

He numbly picked himself up off the deck, standing straighter as he looked along the column of ships. The cheers came from those ahead, who rejoiced in having made it into the shadows.

The Beaconites on this last ship didn't shout. They stared at Nomad, trembling, overwhelmed. They knew. Though they'd only been in the sunlight for a moment, that would have been enough to vaporize their ship. Being that close to death rattled a person.

Someone familiar stood at the front of the group. He hadn't realized that Contemplation was on this ship. She knelt, holding a young girl, and looked at Nomad.

He braced himself for further adulation. Instead she just bowed her head, hugged the girl to her breast, and whispered, "Thank you."

Nomad nodded, then slumped by the railing—barely aware—as they flew. Eventually they landed a safe distance into the dark side, beneath the specular light of the rings. The ships set down in a circle. There, amid plants growing with uncanny speed, they offered prayer.

He'd remained on the ship as each of them left and knelt. He'd never seen it done this way, with everyone kneeling together. They let Confidence lead, but each seemed to be saying their own version, quietly. To Nomad's people, religion, the monarchy, and certain levels of bureaucracy were all intertwined. He'd been modestly religious himself, and still accepted the idea of a God Beyond.

But he'd never seen something like this prayer, so raw, so tearful, so *genuine*. He climbed to his feet and couldn't help but watch, couldn't help but feel the energy.

The people began to rise, and the Greater Good gathered at the heart of the circle they'd formed. There, they waved him forward.

Perhaps he should just have walked away, but the cynical part of him… well, it seemed to have been put to sleep by the fatigue of being completely without Investiture. He stumbled down off the ship, then walked through the undulating, growing grass to stand before the Greater Good.

Each of the three women removed a glove and held a hand toward him, taking his hand in their gnarled ones.

"It won't work," he told them. "Offering me your heat."

"It didn't before," Compassion whispered, seated as always. "But you weren't one of us then."

“I’ve been told by Rebeke,” Contemplation said, “that you prefer not to be called Sunlit.”

He nodded, feeling strangely self-conscious with everyone watching him. “I’d rather be known for what I’ve done, not for some prophecy.”

“You go by the name Nomad. Why?” Confidence asked, squeezing his hand.

“It is the name I deserve. And it sounds a little like my birth name, in my own language.”

“Which is?”

“Sigzil,” he whispered. For some reason, speaking it again after so long brought tears to his eyes.

“Nomad,” Compassion said. “A wanderer with no place. That name no longer fits you, Sigzel, because you have a place. Here, with us.” She said the name a little oddly, according to their own accents.

“Will you accept a name from us?” Contemplation asked. “One you deserve and have earned?”

Feeling numb, he nodded.

“We name you Zellion,” Contemplation said. “After the original Lodestar, who led us to this land and to life. As you have led us.”

“Zellion,” he whispered.

“It means One Who Finds,” Compassion said. “Though I know not the original language.”

“It’s from Yolen,” he whispered. “Where my master was born.”

“Zellion,” Confidence said. “You are one of us now. Whatever you’ve run from, whatever you’ve left, whatever you’ve done—none of that matters. Here, you are of Beacon, of the planet Canticle. We welcome you. We accept you.”

He tried to spit out an argument. Something about how you couldn’t make someone your own with words. You couldn’t *erase* what someone had done with kindly sentiment.

Could you?

Words are power, the knight whispers, as long as they have meaning. As long as they have Intent.

“I…” he whispered. “I accept.”

Warmth flooded into him through their grip. He gasped, eyes going wide. The three elderly women smiled at him as he dropped to his knees, feeling an *ignition* within him. They stepped back, releasing his hand. But then each of the other people, even the children, approached in turn. One at a time,

they touched him with ungloved hands. A hand to his. A touch on the side of the face. A few hugs.

Each of them imparted warmth, until he was *afire* with it. Until he knelt there wondering why he didn't glow like the sun. They stood back, and let it burn within him.

That's not much in the way of BEUs, Auxiliary said. *Less than a single percent combined—but a remarkable amount for each person to give up, though, as they have.*

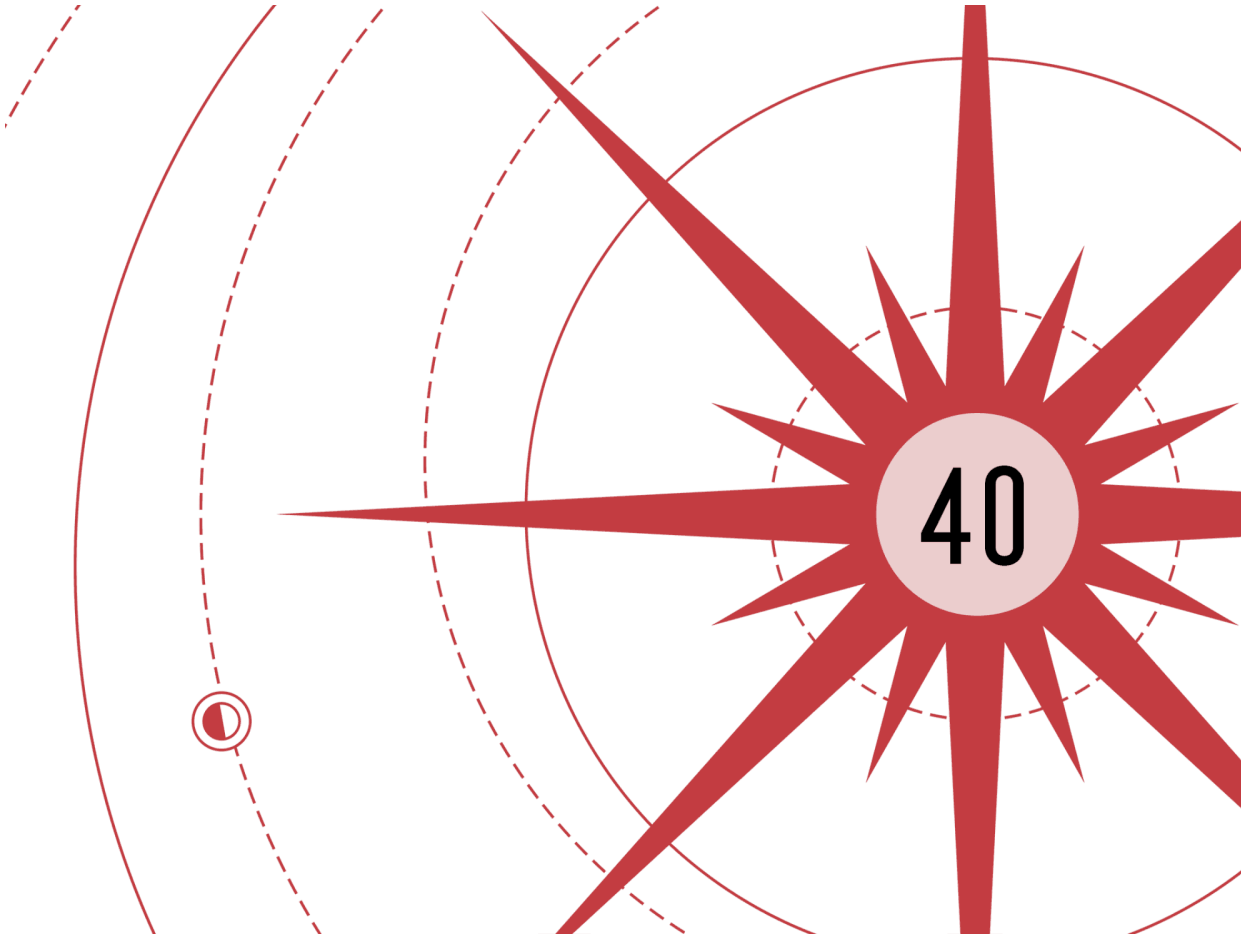
It felt like so much more. Perhaps it was being without, then having the Investiture returned. Perhaps it was something else, something special about how this was given. In contrast to his earlier numbness, he now felt more alive than he had in years.

The Greater Good approached again. "Zellion," Contemplation said, "this is our thanks to you. But…we have work to do. One final task. We need to find the way into the Refuge."

"You have a plan?" Confidence asked. "To get us there?"

"Yes," he said, voice hoarse. "But…could I have a moment or two to process this first, please?"

"Of course," Compassion said. "You have given us all each and every moment we have, from now until we are given to the sun. Please, take some for yourself."



HE DIDN'T WANT to go back to his room because Elegy was there. He wanted to be alone. So he strolled away from the group of ships, looking toward the sky. He'd seen rings on other planets, but never ones so vivid, so colorful, and so bright.

But like so many things in life, it was a trade-off. Vibrant rings. Terrible sun. Hand in hand, dreads and beauties. Same as they were inside a person like him. If he hadn't been through the terrible experiences that had scarred him, he'd never have been able to fight to rescue Rebeke and Zeal.

But if he hadn't been through those horrors, he also wouldn't have been broken.

He stepped up onto a rise. The earth was springy underfoot, and as he stood on the hill, plants grew up around his feet, tickling his shins. His shoes —not proper boots, as he liked, but they were all the Beaconites had been able to provide—were too new, unbroken. They hadn't seen horrors yet, and so they were inflexible.

But once they got worn in, they also would start to wear out. Could a soul wear out, likewise? In his youth, he'd have said that was impossible. That souls weren't like pieces of cloth or leather; that people were too valuable to ever be "worn out." Yet here he was. Taking this people's offered warmth and love, all while leading them toward a lie.

That was beautiful, what they did, Auxiliary said. *You're Connected fully to this place, somehow. You're a man of two homeworlds now.*

"And we'll have to leave this one too," he said, voice hoarse. "We'll have to keep running. Like always."

Yes, that is true. Perhaps we can enjoy it for a time first, though?

Zellion hissed softly, frustration spoiling the moment. What was there to enjoy? The knowledge that these people were doomed? That he'd saved them not to bring *them* to salvation, but so they could help *him* get to safety?

Beside him, a tree was growing—a long, thin shoot, sprouting leaves that trembled like the legs of a toddler taking her first steps. He watched it, then turned away—coming face-to-face with Rebeke, who was striding up the small hill, holding a new coat for him made of the same brown leather as before.

Auxiliary would have noticed her coming, but hadn't said anything. Traitor. And as she joined him—pale face cast in ringlight, holding out that jacket—he realized she hadn't been there earlier. When everyone had presented him with heat. She'd been with the Chorus, having this jacket fabricated for him. He took it, hesitant, worried about that look in her eyes.

She slipped off her glove, then held out her hand. "I didn't get a chance," she said, "to thank you."

He caught her hand by the clothed portion of her wrist as she reached for him. Stopping her from touching his face.

"Why?" she asked. "You let the others."

"I think you might want to give something more than they did," he replied.

She met his eyes briefly, like the fleeting bob of a lifespren, then glanced away, blushing. "Why not?" she asked. "Why shouldn't we find a little comfort in the few hours remaining before we fly back out? They might be the last hours we have."

"I don't begrudge you comfort, Rebeke," he said. "You deserve it. But not with me. I'm too old for you."

"Old? I'm of age. What is a decade or so difference considering what we've been through?"

“A decade or so?” he asked, smiling. He nodded his chin toward the ring of ships. “You see those old women who lead your folk? I’m older than they are.”

She turned toward him, jaw dropping.

He nodded in response.

“Well,” she eventually said, “I don’t care.”

“I do,” he said gently. “Even if I didn’t, Rebeke, I’m going to leave soon. Whatever happens, I must walk away, abandon you all. I can’t stay.

“Before you object and say you wouldn’t care about that either, you’re wrong. My years haven’t given me wisdom, but they have given me knowledge. And I know, I *know*, the hurt it causes when I leave. Assuming I’ve made mistakes. Assuming I’ve let attachments grow.”

She glanced to the side, where he’d rested his hand on the fledgling bough of the growing tree—where little snaking vines had wound around his fingers. Though he tried to pull back gently, he ended up snapping them anyway.

“You could stay,” she whispered. “We could fight whatever is hunting you.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he told her, smiling gently. “You have *no idea*.”

“We thought cresting a mountain was impossible, yet here we are,” she said. “We could climb your mountain too, Zellion.”

Zellion. He did like how the word sounded. Perhaps that was his now-reinforced Connection to their land, and this people. Such an odd thing, Spiritual Connection. He couldn’t even rightly say what it would do to him. Some uses of Investiture were easily quantified, others were…well, as arcane as the human soul itself.

“I’m sorry,” he told Rebeke. “But no. I can’t be this person you’re looking for.”

She looked away sharply, then slid her glove back on. She didn’t run away in shame or embarrassment, which made him feel slightly better. But she also didn’t meet his eyes as she stood there, on the top of the hill, looking up at the rings.

“I no longer want to learn to kill like you do,” she finally said, voice soft. “I don’t want to be that terrible.” She blushed again. “Not that you are…I mean—”

“It’s all right,” he said. “It *is* terrible.”

“Beautiful too.”

“I used to believe that,” he said. “Though…”

She cocked her head, glancing at him.

“There was a time,” he said, “when I could stand tall even when fighting. A time before my Torment seized me.” He took in her confused stare, and felt moved to give her something. An explanation, to soften his rejection. “I was a knight,” he said, “of a very exclusive order. Two different orders actually, at two different times. For the first, I was one of their leaders, with oaths that were supposed to turn what I did from terrible into—if not beautiful—honorable. But then…”

How to explain this next part? A part he didn’t fully understand himself. “I was given charge over an *extremely* dangerous item. Capable of killing gods. Laying waste to planets. I carried that burden, found new bonds, but the weapon consumed important parts of me. Shredded the soul of one of my dearest friends. Stole my armor. I was left a husk of what I’d once been. Not just because of what the weapon had done to me—but because of the things I’d done.”

He clasped his hands behind his back, remembering what it felt like to wear that uniform, bear that armor, carry those oaths. “I had to ask myself, once it was all done, if honor was a sham. If it was a ruse used to make men kill one another—to let them *pretend* there was a purpose to it. If that concept—the very idea of an honorable soldier—was not the most pernicious evil that had ever blighted the cosmere.”

“And what you did in protecting us?” she said softly. “Was that a blight? A pernicious evil?”

Storms, he didn’t want to have to make that call. Judge between evil and honor. He just wanted to keep running. Why did questions like this always bubble up if he stayed in one place too long?

How many excuses would he make for walking away? And would he ever be able to dig down within himself and find the actual reason he’d done it? Not the surface-level, easy explanation. But the core of what made him, of all people, capable of turning his back on everyone he’d loved?

Rebeke was waiting for an answer to her question. She looked at him, bright-eyed and curious.

“No,” he told her. “Protecting your people by fighting the Charred was not evil, Rebeke. But I don’t think I can ever call it beautiful again.” He shook his head. “You wouldn’t say so either. Not if you could look inside me and see how much *fun* I was having during that fight.”

She paled visibly. “I still want to find a way to help my people,” she said, looking away from him. “If not by fighting, then by leading. But there will be time, I suppose, to figure that out once we’ve found the Refuge.”

He grimaced. She’d storming handed him the opportunity, hadn’t she? Even if she didn’t know it. He couldn’t just saunter past that one and pretend nothing was wrong.

“Rebeke,” he forced himself to say. “I have to say it again. This sanctuary you’re looking for. It doesn’t—”

“Stop,” she said, spinning on him. “Don’t say it.”

“You should know what it actually is. A place created by outsiders to protect themselves. A—”

“You told us earlier there was a chance,” she said. “Is that still true? Is there *any* hope that a place exists where we can find safety?”

Storms, he wasn’t certain he could maintain that lie. This was almost certainly a Scadrian research facility, by that key. A place to house a small group of scientists come to study the way Canticle’s sun worked.

They would have watched this people with the cold detachment of researchers with subjects. He’d been there. He’d seen that kind of attitude. It wasn’t universal among scientists, but this would be a self-selecting group. And as proof, he knew they had done nothing to help so far, despite the terrible lives this people lived.

“Don’t say anything,” she said. “I see it in your eyes.”

“But—”

“We have a story,” she said, “about an ancient man who asked to know his fate. In it, hope was extinguished forever. For he knew the answer.”

“It’s…a common variety of myth,” he said. “I know a dozen variations from a dozen different planets.”

“I will not be that man,” she said. “I will maintain hope.”

“Then maintain hope in something real,” he said. “If the Refuge proves to not be real, you need to find another path to safety. The one your sister envisioned, Rebeke. Throwing off the rule of the Cinder King.”

“Where has that gotten us?”

“It’s made you into a beacon,” he said. “Others will see. There comes a time when every tyrant is weak or exposed. Given the chance, his people will topple him themselves.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain,” he said.

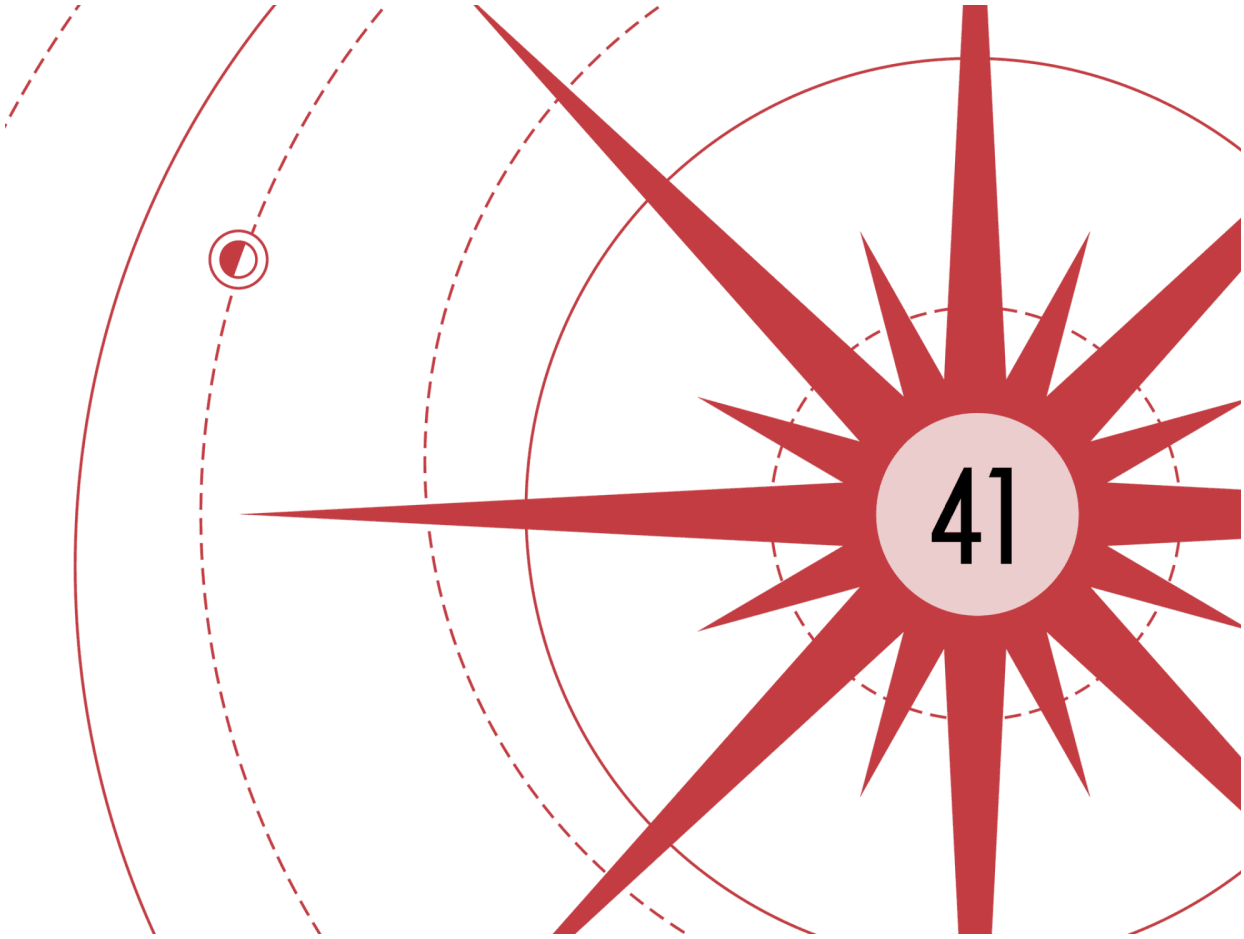
She thought a moment, but shook her head. “Elegy could have persuaded the people of Union to overthrow the Cinder King, but we don’t have that Elegy anymore. And we can’t survive any longer out here. We have ditched our farming equipment. We have a *single* prospector. We don’t have food, living space, supplies.

“Our only *real* hope is to find the Refuge. It’s what the Greater Good wants, and it’s what our people want. So keep your concerns to yourself. And leave us with hope.”

He took a deep breath, then nodded.

“All right, then,” she said. “What do we do next? How do we find the entrance and how do we get through the Cinder King’s forces to reach it? He knows we’ve survived. He’s going to array everything he has to stop us.”

“Well, this is where you’re fortunate to have a killer among you,” Zellion said. “Because it’s time to show the Cinder King what an *actual* battle looks like.”



REBEKE WAS RIGHT. The Cinder King *had* brought all his forces to bear. He lined them up, dozens of ships and hundreds of Charred, hovering in the air just outside the cloud cover of the shadow. Waiting exactly in the place where, one day ago, the Beaconites had tried to locate the Refuge.

Judging by the look of those forces, the Cinder King thought he was ready for anything. That made it oh so very sweet to watch as Zellion's ships emerged from the rain and opened fire with large, ship-mounted guns.

Balls of light as thick as a man's leg cut the twilight sky, shot from the cannons, ripping apart the Cinder King's forces like they were twigs before a highstorm. Ships went blazing to the ground, and Charred howled as they were blasted free from exploding decks.

The initial barrage—and the shock it prompted—was the primary thing Zellion was counting on. He rode in the lead ship, Elegy's ship, which had a single cannon welded to the roof. Four of their other ships had guns, while

the remaining four acted exclusively as transports, clogged with as many people as could be stuffed onto them.

The improvised gunship fire cut through the leading enemy ranks, punching a wide hole in the Cinder King's forces—which scattered. In that instant, Zellion's forces seemed invincible. He glanced to the side, to where Rebeke was piloting the *Dawnchaser*. In her eyes, he saw a feeling he'd once known. That feeling of terrible awe, of horror and nausea, when confronting your own capacity for destruction.

That was the moment it hit home—amid the roar and the silence of cannon fire. Watching people fall, torn apart by what you'd done. That moment changed a person.

Storms, he hoped the enemy responded with a similar stupor. One thing he'd learned in combat was this: never underestimate the sheer *panic* a coordinated strike can cause in an untrained line of troops. Many battles could be won in a single brilliant charge.

His ships flew right through the center of the enemy forces. Then kept going. Because he was certain the Refuge, if it existed, was *not* in this specific region.

"Shades!" Zeal's voice said from the radio. "That was a beautiful sight."

"I offer this warning," Solemnity Divine said. "Those shots drained our sunhearts something frightening. We don't have much left, after our flight here and what we gave Zellion. Be careful how much you fire them."

After Zellion had expended all of his Investiture to shield the final ship, the Greater Good had gladly offered him even more from each remaining sunheart. Enough to get him just over five percent Skip capacity, just barely above his minimum thresholds to maintain peak fighting capacity. Storms, he could barely remember what it was like to run around at fifty or sixty percent capacity, never needing to worry about running dry. How long had it been? Though he missed that, he found himself even more grateful for this five percent, in the face of Beacon's sacrifice.

"How certain are you," Confidence said, "in this plan of yours, Zellion? We could fly down low in the chaos and use our prospector to find the opening."

"It's not here," Zellion said, leaning down to the radio. "I promise you that, Confidence. We push forward. Projecting confidence—as you understand so well—at full speed."

They did so, ignoring the landscape they'd searched the day before. And despite the certainty he projected, his nerves betrayed him. This was a

gamble.

Zellion was betting—with everyone's lives as the ante—that the actual location was close. That the Cinder King had managed to keep the true location a secret, but only by a little. Like how a magician might focus everyone's attention on one hand, while the other secretly stacked the deck.

They knew the Cinder King's city always traveled in a straight line, periodically stopping to farm. Somewhere along that path, he tried to open the door to the Refuge. But Zellion was banking on the idea that, to prevent anyone from finding it, he'd arranged for inaccuracies to be propagated about its true location.

More, he was gambling that the Cinder King would be worried. That he'd be watching to see what Zellion did. That he'd be frightened, deep down, that his secret was not safe. That—

It's happening. Look to your right, ninety degrees.

"There!" Zellion said, pointing as a squadron that had been off to the side—including the Cinder King's own ship—turned and blasted backward. Ten ships, presumably among the fastest in the enemy's fleet, went flying on ahead.

They would lead everyone right to the doorway.

It's uncanny, you realize, how you can pick out what people are going to do sometimes.

"How?" Rebeke asked. "How did you know?"

"Deep down," he said, leaning forward, "the Cinder King is insecure. He worries he isn't as strong as he acts. He worries that it will all be taken from him: his throne, his power, his secrets. We are playing on those fears.

"We're saying, 'We know what we're doing. We know where the opening really is.' After all, why else would we commit everything to breaking through like this? Why else would we fly with such confidence right toward his secret location?"

"But we're not," she said. "We don't know where it is."

"He doesn't know that," Zellion said. "In his eyes, we've found him out. So now he needs to go protect it. He doesn't realize—he can't realize, because his insecurities are too overpowering and his intellect too underwhelming—that he's actually *leading* us right to his secret."

"Assuming we survive that long," Zeal said over the radio. "Some of those other ships are recovering. They're sweeping toward us."

Damnation. The enemy ships had indeed started to swarm back. They were probably realizing just how slow the Beaconite ships had to move to

protect those overloaded transports. Or perhaps they had seen that the guns were just welded in place and didn't have proper turrets.

For all their startling flash and bang, Zellion's forces were extremely vulnerable. "Rebeke," he said, "you're going to have to do what I told you."

"I don't know how to aim this thing, though!"

"Don't focus on shooting it. Focus on getting me where I need to be." Zellion grabbed a steel spear—fashioned for him by the Chorus—then left the cab, striding into the back room. He stopped beside Elegy, still chained by one hand to the wall.

"You're needed," he said, reaching for her chained wrist.

"I'm not ready!" she said. "I can't control it."

"A lesson for you," he said. "You never *get* to be ready. You just have to move forward anyway. That's something Kaladin taught me." He undid her manacle.

She immediately leaped to her feet, pushing toward him aggressively. He locked eyes with her and waited for the punch. Which…through a battle conveyed by the twisting of expressions on her face…never came.

Something thumped from outside—a Charred jumping onto their deck. He had little hope they'd be scared away by a simple kata this time. The Cinder King was backed into a corner. His forces would fight.

Elegy turned toward the sound and growled softly.

"Stay close to me," Zellion said, "and don't lose control. Remember, we aren't here to kill. We're here to survive."

"I just want to fight."

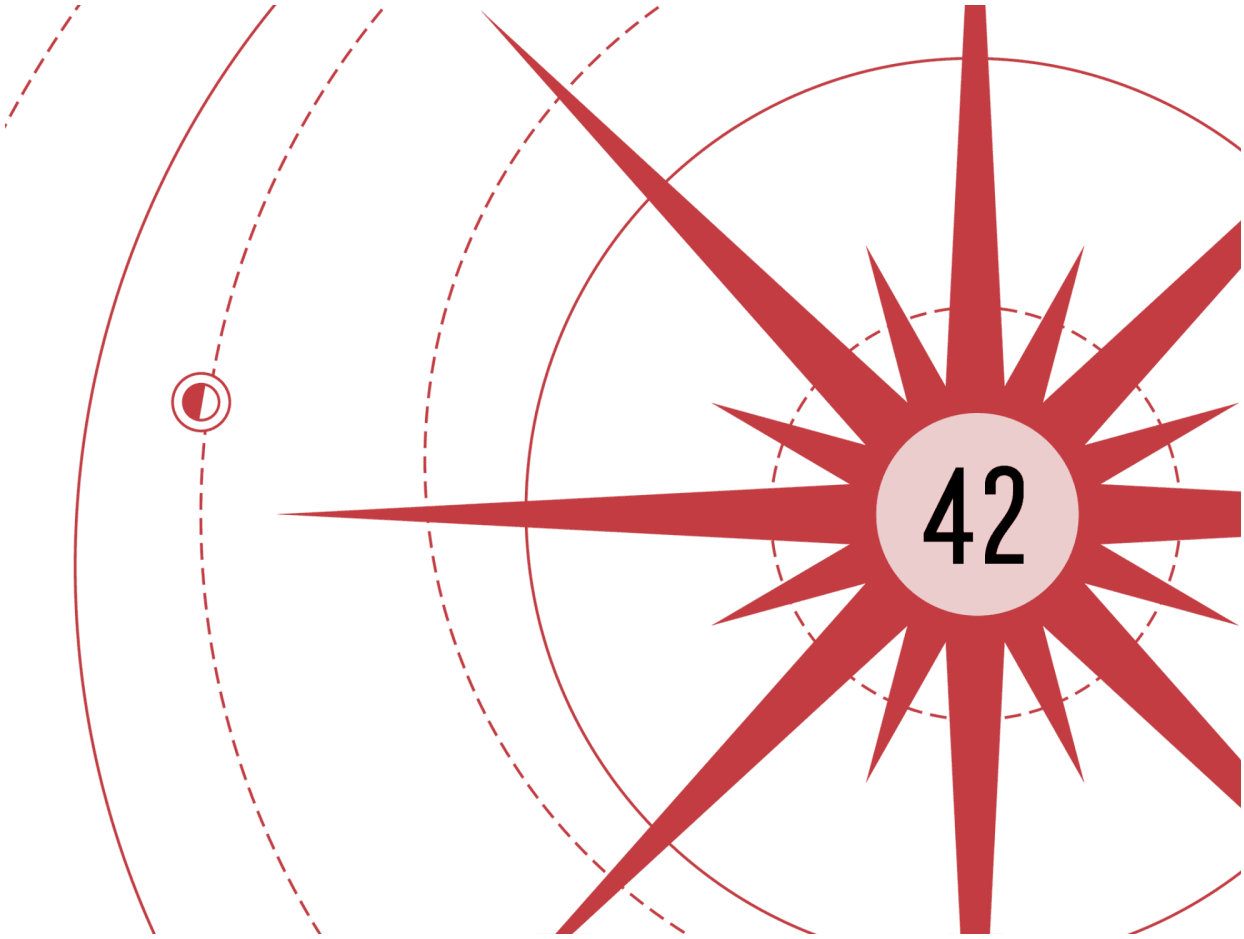
"Fight with *purpose*," he said. "Never forget the why." He raised his empty hand, and a glittering spear appeared in it. He'd been draining away the patina on his soul using the little sunheart, but it was still satisfying how easily he managed to create the weapon.

"Take good care of him," Zellion told Elegy, handing the Shardspear to her.

"Why give it to me?" she said, taking the spear with reverence.

"Because you lack training," he said, "but I still need backup. You'll be far more effective with that than you will be empty-handed, and the fact that it can cut through anything will make up for your inability to thrust with it accurately. Just be careful—don't stab the ship, and do your best not to hit me. Cuts from weapons like that are storming tough to heal."

He nodded to Elegy, who nodded back, eyes alight with eagerness. Together, they burst onto the deck.



ZELLION USED HIS spear to catch the arm of a Charred swinging a machete at his head. He heaved back, then tripped the fellow—but before he could deliver a death blow, Elegy was upon the Charred, stabbing at him repeatedly with her spear. It didn't cut his flesh, but his soul—and when it went into the Charred's brain, his eyes burned and shriveled like coals, his cinderheart going out.

Once he was dead, she kept going, stabbing down through him into the deck itself. Zellion caught her arm, making her pause.

Maybe we should be a little more…reserved with her weapon, eh? I'll try to remember to blunt it if she goes too far.

Zellion looked Elegy in the eyes again. "Be careful."

She nodded, wide eyed, *way* too excited. At least she was enthusiastic.

Only one Charred had made it to their ship; he'd come off a hovercycle, which—unfortunately—had fallen behind after he'd leaped over. It was now vanishing into the distance behind them.

The *Dawnchaser*, the most maneuverable of the Beacon forces, flew a little off from the main formation—which was made up of the four gunships surrounding the small cluster of four densely packed passenger ships.

It was an extremely vulnerable position, something the majority of the Cinder King's pilots seemed to recognize. While their leader and his most elite had flown off in their fastest ships, the rest buzzed around the Beaconites. Fortunately they didn't immediately go for the transports; they took the more obvious option of trying to take out the gunships.

People often aimed for the defenses first, as if there was a kind of hierarchy you were supposed to follow. He wasn't going to complain. Rebeke, following his instructions, swung the *Dawnchaser* in close to Zeal's gunship—which had five Charred swarming its deck. Once close, Zellion jumped. He hit the deck with spear in hand, drawing the attention of the Charred before they could go for the people inside the cab. At Zellion's suggestion, they'd kept the gunships clear of civilians. Just a pilot and copilot in each one.

That left tons of people on the decks of the transports exposed to gunfire and shrapnel. He tried not to think about that as Elegy landed beside him, and they engaged the Charred on the deck of Zeal's gunship. The two of them made a good team—as Zellion proved effective at seizing attention with his flashing spear and tactical strikes. The Charred focused on him, which let Elegy tear through them with the borrowed weapon.

In seconds, four of the Charred were down, and the last one leaped off the deck toward another gunship passing nearby. Zellion nodded to Elegy, who was grinning, and they followed—soaring through the air. As they landed on this second gunship, they met another group of Charred.

These, though, scattered instead of fighting. They surged off the ship to nearby passing enemy vessels.

That was wrong. Very wrong. He knew from his experience with Elegy that Charred preferred to fight, no matter what. They would only run away if directly and forcibly instructed to do so. He glanced to the side and saw small cinderhearts on the deck—perhaps attached with magnets—glowing from the center with wiring and casing around them.

He grabbed Elegy by instinct and threw her toward the *Dawnchaser*, which was sweeping back their direction. He jumped a second later, then the ship behind them—poor people in the cab included—went up in a bright explosion of red fire and burning metal.

Elegy landed on the *Dawnchaser*, then stumbled, staring down at the wreck as it plowed into the muddy landscape below—then detonated again, the shockwave rattling their own ship.

"Cheating," she hissed, her cinderheart pulsing with a white-red anger. "That's *cheating*."

"There are no rules," he said. "We're the ones who brought cannons to the fight."

He felt like a fool, though. He'd known they used explosives. The Beaconites had deployed them effectively in their initial raid to save their friends. He should have prepared for this. The maneuver made sense, as the bombs would work even if Zellion proved too frightening or powerful for the Charred. They didn't need to fight. They just needed to be mobile delivery mechanisms.

"Get back onto Zeal's ship," Zellion shouted, pointing. "Defend it! Don't let any of the Charred linger long enough to plant more bombs. If they do, toss the bombs overboard."

She nodded as he waved for Rebeke to steer them that direction. Elegy jumped across to that deck, and Zellion pointed forward—to where Charred were dropping off of an enemy ship to the deck of the third of the four gunships.

Rebeke pushed them forward, and he leaped, using the momentum to carry him through the rushing air to land on the ship. A Charred here was charging something against her cinderheart—one of the bombs. It seemed they needed to be primed, which gave him a few moments to break through the others and stab her through the neck.

His weapon wasn't Invested, though. Just a common spear. Shockingly she *survived* that hit, forcing him to slap her hand and kick the bomb over

the side. The explosion rocked the ship as he sparred with three other Charred. At least the one he'd stabbed seemed to have trouble fighting. She could barely keep to her feet.

Thinking of that, he focused on the feet and legs of the Charred. He got in a few stabs, then grabbed the railing and motioned in a circle. The pilot, a woman he didn't know well, got the idea and rolled the ship—sending a bunch of wounded Charred screaming into the mud below while Zellion hung on.

A quick glance told him that Elegy was holding her own on the deck of Zeal's gunship. Aux was extremely effective against enemies who were used to being able to rush in and dominate the fight, unconcerned about whether they might take a hit or two. A weapon that cut through metal and severed souls was an excellent way to punish the overly aggressive.

Elegy finished off the Charred who tried to stop her, then kicked two bombs over the side—they didn't detonate, but instead fell mutely to the mud.

Unfortunately that only protected two of the gunships. One was down. Elegy was on one deck. He was on the third. And the last…

He felt the shock wave as a blast went off nearby. He spun and found the final gunship—piloted by Jeffrey Jeffrey—struggling to stay in the air. It had a gaping hole in one side, where—in the strange way of the cinderhearts of this place—the steel itself continued to smolder. Judging by the way the ship was floundering, it was as good as down—especially as he saw three more Charred affixing bombs to various portions of the deck.

So that was two gunships down. And…

No. Not down yet. That ship *was* dead. But people were still alive on board.

This time, he didn't need prompting from Auxiliary. He didn't think further; he ran to the edge of his ship and leaped. A moment of rushing wind followed, then he hit the deck of the fourth gunship hard—as it had been approaching too quickly—losing his spear in the roll. He was thrown to the side as the ship rocked.

With a cry, he summoned Auxiliary as a grappling hook and sank it into the deck, holding himself in place. Hopefully Elegy would be able to survive for a short time unarmed.

Wind roaring around him, ship trembling, he surged to his feet and—ignoring the Charred who were charging their bombs—bounded for the cab

of the ship. Inside, he could see only Jeffrey Jeffrey, trying frantically to control the ship.

Zellion summoned Auxiliary as a full-sized Shardblade, as long as a man was tall, then used it to *slice* off the top of the ship's cab like he was opening a can of food. He saw no sign of the copilot; perhaps they'd been thrown free. Zellion pulled himself up over the lip and reached down, grabbing a confused Jeffrey Jeffrey by the coat. Auxiliary sliced the man's restraining belt free, then Zellion grabbed him with both hands and heaved him out.

He looked back as the Charred leaped free of the ship, falling to the mud below, as other ships were too far to reach. Zellion eyed the blinking bombs, then summoned Auxiliary once more. As a shield. On top of one of the bombs.

Zellion jumped onto it as the bomb detonated.

He and Jeffrey Jeffrey were thrown into the air. Zellion caught sight of a flash of color and metal in the chaos, and swung. When everything settled, he hung by one arm from a set of claw hooks he'd formed from Auxiliary, which he'd rammed into the hull of the *Dawnchaser*. He held Jeffrey Jeffrey by one arm beneath him, dangling above a drop of some twenty or thirty feet.

Looks like he's got a few broken ribs, the knight observes. Severe whiplash. Some nasty bruises waiting to form all along his right side, maybe a concussion.

But he was alive. Zellion hauled him up and tossed him onto the deck of the *Dawnchaser*. Zellion followed, stumbling up onto the deck. On a nearby ship, Elegy was facing several Charred on her own. He shouted to her, then formed Auxiliary into the shape of a metal ball, easy to throw. He hurled it to her, and she caught it. Aux formed into a machete in her hand.

Zellion turned back to Jeffrey Jeffrey, dazed on the deck. The bearded man looked up, eyes wide, trembling. "Why…" he said. "Why is the light breaking around you?"

Zellion glanced to the side. More fragments hung in the air around him in an arch. Three others glowed on his arms, remnants of a different kind of spren. All were reflections of light in the air, making it seem distorted. Maybe…ten of them? Almost like old times. The remnants of two orders, and the oaths he'd left behind.

Nomad smiled and gestured for Jeffrey Jeffrey to make his way into the cab of the *Dawnchaser*, which the man did, limping. Zellion prepared himself for the next fight, raising his fists, ready to go hand to hand.

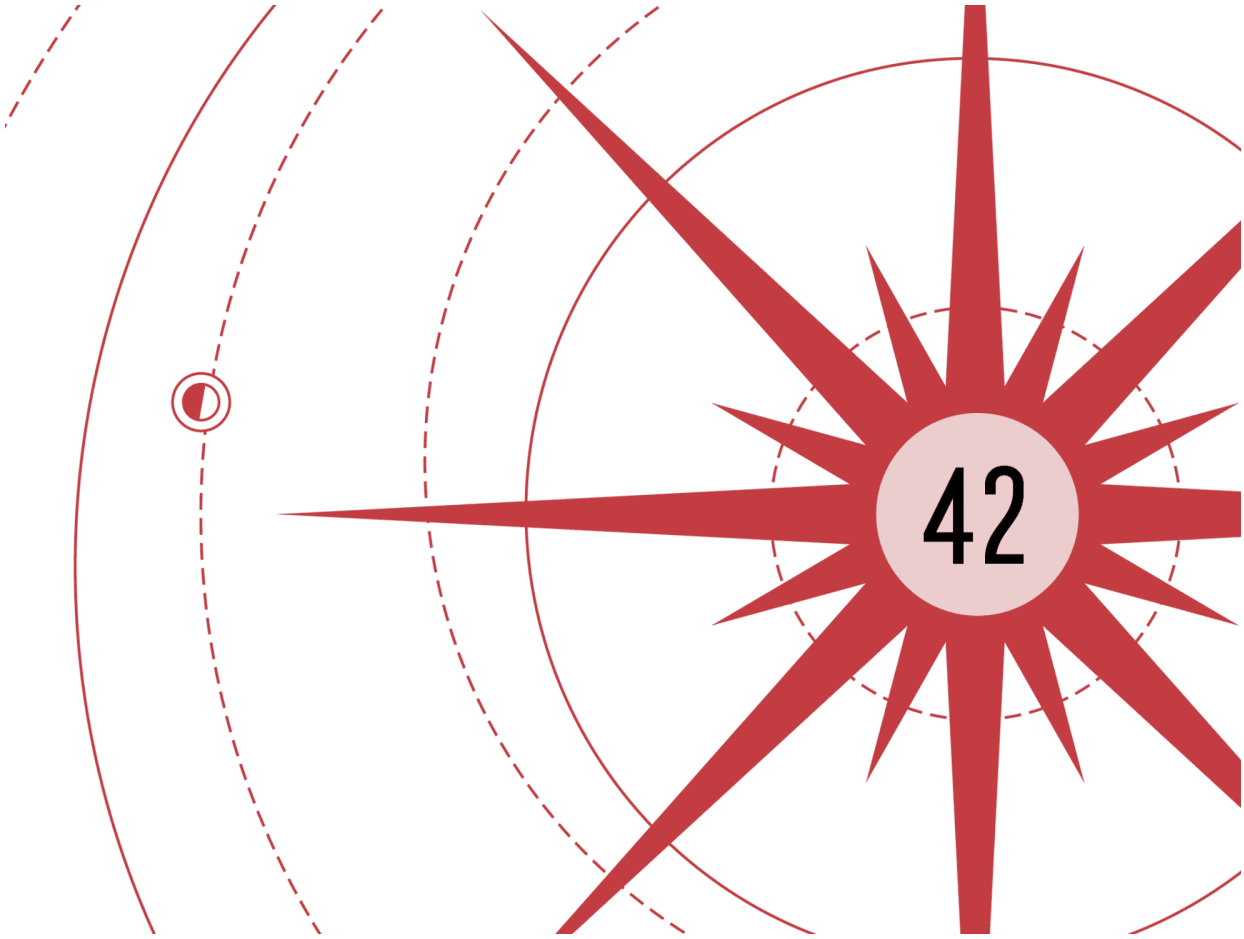
But the enemy forces were falling back for some reason.

There, the knight says. Look, faithful squire. Ships have landed ahead of us.

The Cinder King's entourage. They'd circled a spot on the ground, and had sharpshooters on the decks with rifles pointed skyward. Zellion nodded through the windshield to Rebeke, who took their ship out of the formation and flew it down to do a quick scan. Blasts of rifle fire took bits off the railing and made dents in the hull, but didn't penetrate the thicker armor of Elegy's vessel.

Rebeke surveyed the spot, then met his eyes through the glass. She nodded once, firmly. The ship's prospector scanners had identified a large power source below—as he'd hoped, the Cinder King had led them straight to the Refuge.

It was time to see what was inside.



ELEGY GOT THE SENSE that the battle, in its current form, was finished. The enemy ships were pulling back, and the *Dawnchaser* had finished its low-level sweep and determined they were in the right location. Now it seemed like a standoff between the Beaconites in the air and the Cinder King's forces below.

She felt…fear. Not the blinding, sudden, debilitating fear of hands around your neck. The creeping, pernicious, omnipresent dread that things were slipping out of your control.

That wasn't her emotion. It was the Cinder King's. *Her* own emotions were still aflame. A fire that urged her to find another enemy, to keep swinging this magnificent machete that killed without wounding. To never stop moving, never stop attacking. Never. Stop.

But there was nobody else to kill, and she held herself back—with effort—from entering the cab of her ship and seeking a confrontation with the

person piloting it. Instead, as the *Dawnchaser* swept close, she vaulted over the span between the two ships and grabbed hold of the railing.

Moments later, she pushed into the cab, where the woman Rebeke was at the controls. Elegy clutched her magical weapon. But she did *not* need to use it. The man, the killer, had explained. She could choose her moments. She could make them all the sweeter for having held back.

Rebeke turned—then smiled at her. A genuine smile, it seemed. She was *glad* to see Elegy. Granted, she'd acted that way before—but following the energizing thrill of the killing, knowing that in the back of her mind she'd been contemplating attacking Rebeke… It was such an incongruous thing to see an inviting smile.

She wants me to be here with her, Elegy thought. *What is wrong with her?*

It was disarming. Intriguing. Even…inspiring?

"Elegy," Rebeke said, cocking her head. "Are you well?"

"I…feel different."

"You're remembering," Rebeke said, grabbing her hand. "It's going to happen. You'll remember everything soon."

"Are you not," Elegy said, "supposed to be piloting?"

"Right!" Rebeke said, spinning toward her seat. She did something with the radio, and the killer's voice came on, speaking from one of the gunships.

"All right," he said. "Everyone be ready to swing down into the space I make for us."

"They're entrenched there," Confidence replied. "How are you going to make space for us? They'll shoot us if we land."

"You people…" the killer said, his voice…grumpy? That didn't seem an appropriate word for a man of his ferocity, so perhaps she did not understand emotions as well as she thought. "You spend your lives flying. How can you be so ignorant of the power of air superiority? I guess if you never go to war, and rarely stay in one place long… Well, just watch."

Elegy leaned forward and watched through the windshield as one of the gunships broke out of their formation. It swung around, then dipped, so its large anti-ship guns were pointed at an angle toward the ground. Then it swooped past the Cinder King's position, firing.

Turned out, being on the ground—and therefore immobile—when someone *else* had a ship with that kind of firepower was exciting. The type of excitement that most people didn't like. The type that involved ships exploding, people screaming and jumping out of the way. The killer was able

to stay out of range and drop his shots with gravity—and while he could come in at full speed, they had to just sit there.

In moments, the Cinder King and his forces were scattered. Elegy nodded. It was an effective way to kill, but far too distant and unengaging for her taste. She'd have enjoyed being among those being shot at, perhaps. So much energy and alarm there.

Wait. No. That might get her killed. She was supposed to want to avoid that. After all, who would make certain Rebeke smiled if Elegy died?

A conundrum.

"That was certainly impressive," Confidence said over the radio. "But I offer this warning: if we land there, won't *they* have your 'air superiority' over us?"

"Yup," the killer said. "Which is why I suggest we be quick about this next part. Everyone land and be ready to run for shelter. This is what we've been waiting for. It's time to open that door."

While everyone else did as he asked, Rebeke swooped in and—using a screen on the ship that told her where to look—activated the dirt movers on the *Dawnchaser*. Elegy left her to it, scrambling out onto the deck and jumping the twenty or so feet to the soft ground.

By the time the others had landed and gathered, Rebeke had uncovered something. A large metallic disc set into the ground, only about two feet under the ashen lava soil. Rebeke landed her ship and joined the group huddled around the disc.

The killer stopped at the edge of it, and Zeal joined him, handing up the smaller disc they'd all talked about as being some sort of key. The killer took this, looked it over, then tossed it back to Zeal before hopping down the several feet to land on the surface of the silvery thing.

There, he leaned forward and spoke in a loud voice. "Under the Refugee and Lost Expatriate Bill of Silverlight Codes of Interplanetary Conduct, I formally request asylum in this facility. Please respond."

Silence. Why wasn't he using the key? Elegy understood all those words, but the context eluded her. Instead she looked to the sky, where the Cinder King's forces—looking even more intimidating—were gathering around them.

Suddenly a cylindrical pole, maybe four feet tall, shot up from the metal below, emerging near the killer. A voice spoke from it, heavily accented, but in their language. "Wait. Are you Rosharan?"

"I am," the killer said. "I seek asylum under the—"

“Yes, yes. Fine. You can negotiate.”

“These will need protection while we discuss,” he said, gesturing to the others.

Silence. Elegy watched the sky, trying to feel the fear the others obviously did from their postures. It was difficult for her because the Cinder King was no longer afraid. He thought he had them.

Then a blast of energy ripped up from beneath the earth, shooting right across the Cinder King’s bow. The ships pulled back in a panic. Since when did the *ground* shoot? It was a deliberate message: stay back.

“Fine,” the accented voice said from the pole. “You may bring three people, Rosharan. We’re only listening, mind you, because we’re curious how you got here.”

Another column rose beside the pole, this one much larger, and a door opened on the front. Some kind of…transport device? To carry them down into the Refuge?

“I assume I should bring the Greater Good?” he asked, turning toward the gathering townspeople.

“Bring Rebeke in my place,” Compassion said from her chair, which her grandsons set down on the earth for her. “We should not send all three. Just in case. As you taught us.”

The killer and Rebeke shared a glance, and he nodded, then paused, looking to Elegy. “I’ll need that back.”

Right. She still had the sword. She’d been clinging to it, but forced herself to extend it toward him. The weapon vanished from her fingers, turning to glowing mist, before she could deliver it.

The killer stepped closer, speaking softly. “You might be the only one these people have after this.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If the next part goes poorly,” he said, “try to protect them. I guess that’s all I can ask.”

“Poorly?” she asked, cocking her head. “Why would it go poorly?”

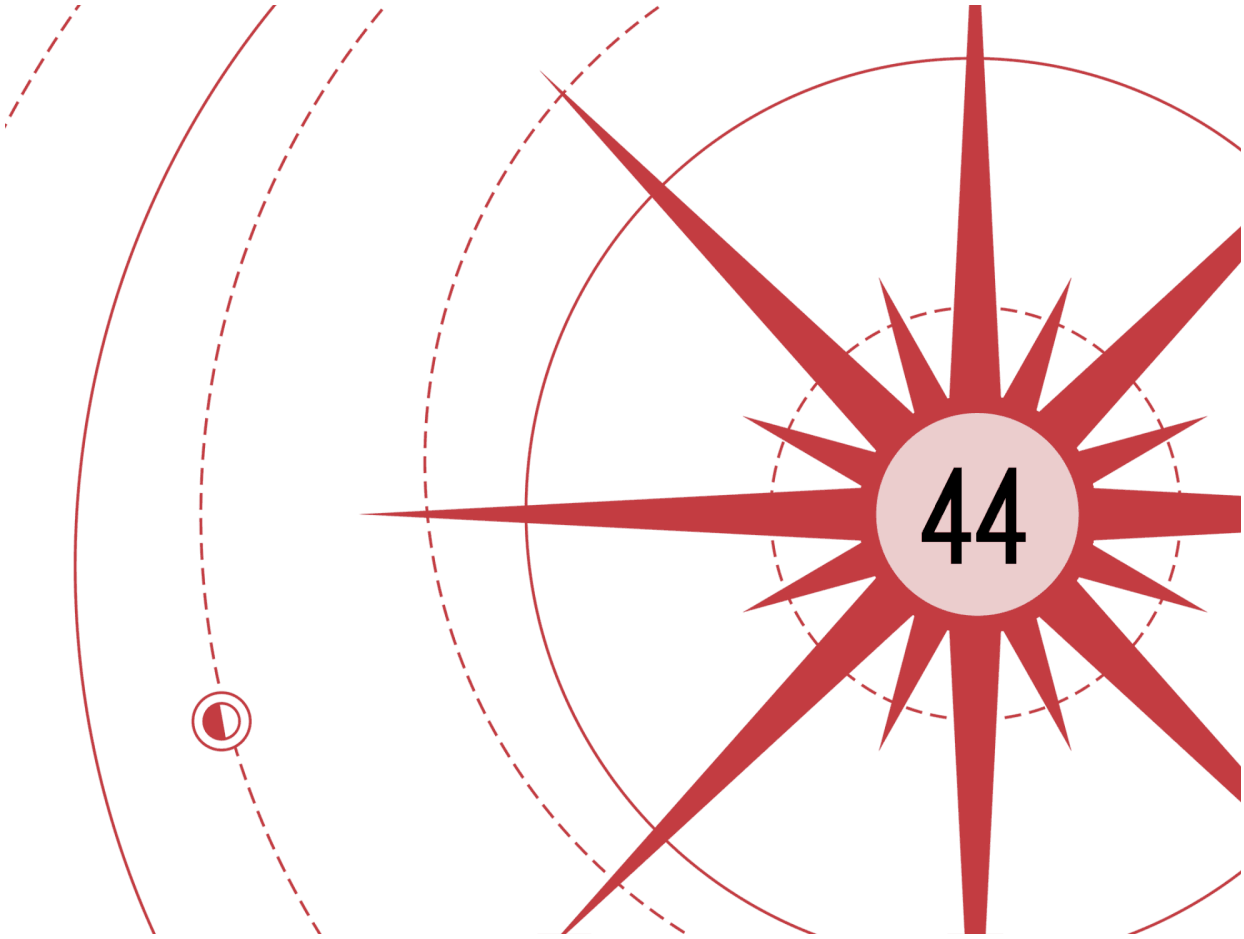
He just gave her a grim look. And that, she knew how to interpret perfectly. A battle was coming. For him.

“You’re going to fight the people who live in the Refuge?” she whispered.

“Not physically,” he said. “Which is unfortunate. Because I’m pretty sure I could win, if that were the case.”

Leaving her with that cryptic statement, he entered the metal tube, joined by Confidence, Contemplation, and Rebeke.

A second later, the tube descended, taking them to the place of safety.



THE DOOR OPENED, and Zellion saw exactly what he'd feared. A large room, capsule shaped, with workstations set through it and monitors on the walls. There would be two more levels beneath this, one for activities, one for quarters. It was big enough for the two dozen people who crewed it—but it was *no* giant sanctuary.

Beside Zellion, the three Beaconites regarded their surroundings with wide eyes, stunned, maybe amazed. They were a technologically advanced people, yes, but they obviously hadn't seen anything like this before.

It was, indeed, a spaceship. A science vessel. Embedded in the ground of this planet to hide and protect it while the scientists took readings. They could *maybe* take in a hundred and thirty or so refugees. But it would pack the place to the walls, strain their life support.

But…maybe there was another way.

Two people, a man and a woman, stepped up to meet him. They wore small metal ornaments at the sides of their faces, triangular, with red enamel.

These were TimeTellers, one faction among the many Scadrian political movements. Theoretically they were neutral in the current conflicts. A group of scientists, seeking to "understand the various mysteries of the cosmere." And they were absolutely not, of course, an arm of the military working in secret to develop tech that would let Scadrial stay ahead in the increasingly dangerous arms race that currently consumed most of the developed planets.

"Rosharan," the man said in his own tongue. "Can we speak in a civilized language, please? Do you speak Malwish?"

Zellion shook his head, pretending not to understand and hoping they didn't speak any of his native languages. At least he could honestly claim ignorance of Azish, having been forced to overwrite the ability to speak that with the local language.

"Very well," the man said, continuing in the local tongue. He had tan skin and was tall for a Scadrian, even an inch or so taller than Zellion. "Rosharan, have you said the oaths?"

"No," Zellion lied. "I'm a free man. I've got no part in the conflicts. Just want to keep my head down and stay alive."

"Can you fight?"

"I have a Blade."

The two Scadrians shared a look.

"How did you get onto this planet?" the woman asked.

"I came via Shadesmar," he said.

"There's no perpendicularity here."

"Got shoved through by a temporary one," he lied. "I was traveling this way but didn't intend to stop. Now I'm stuck. It was the strangest thing. Don't know if I can even explain it."

"There *are* strange events on this planet," the woman said, folding her arms. Like the man, she wore modern clothing. Black jeans, a lab coat, one of the fancy shirts their space force loved.

"We'll be leaving soon," the man said. "Travel is dangerous these days. We could use someone who can fight. You've done mercenary work, I assume, if you have a Blade?"

Zellion nodded.

"Excellent," the man said, clapping his hands. "You're hired."

"Hired?" Confidence said, finally shaking out of her awed stupor. "But—"

"I'm not interested in a job," Zellion said. "I'm already working for these people. I want to negotiate for you to help them."

“Please, dwellers in the Refuge,” Rebeke said, dropping to her knees. “Please. Let us join you. We are hard workers, with strong souls. We have rejected the Cinder King’s terrible ways and have overcome so much to get to you. *Please*.”

“You? Join us?” the woman said, sounding amused. “We’re basically at capacity as it is. What do you think we are? A charity?”

“Listen,” Zellion said, stepping closer to the two of them. “Have you been watching what’s going on above?”

“We have a few of the locals already,” the man said, “to use as subjects in our research. We could use one or two more, I suppose, but that’s it. Really, what we need are those sunhearts, but we already have a supplier of those.”

“Supplier?” Zellion asked. “How did you…” It clicked. “The Cinder King. Guy with the glowing eyes. He’s been meeting with you?”

“Delivers us things we need now and then,” the woman said. “And we give him little tidbits of technology or knowledge. These people had little idea how to exploit their native Investiture.”

Storms. The Cinder King hadn’t been *trying* to get into this place—he’d accomplished it, likely years ago. That was probably how he’d learned to make Charred, how he got the bracers to control them. He hadn’t been protecting this place because he wanted to escape into it; he had been using it as the secret source of his power.

“Listen,” Zellion said, “that man is a tyrant.”

“And?” the woman said.

“What are their problems to us?” the man said. “You’re a mercenary, Rosharan. You know there are dozens of these little planets scattered around, all with their own backward monarchies and their own stupid ways of doing things. What, you want us to take in everyone who is having a bad day?”

“I…”

The objections were obvious. But he found he couldn’t make them because he’d known all along what would happen here. He’d been *planning* for it to happen. Farther into the room, sitting on a nearby table, was a glowing jar. Dor, they called it. A kind of pure Investiture which he could use to activate another Skip, to escape this world, to run to another planet. Just as he’d hoped. This was why he’d come.

What else had he been expecting?

He’d gotten the Beaconites to the door, then through it. That’s what he’d promised. And they’d known. He’d warned them multiple times.

As words failed him, the others tried. “Please, may we negotiate?” Confidence said. “May we invoke, if not your sense of mercy or justice, your sense of commerce? What can we trade you for our safety?”

The two just gave her amused looks. If the Scadrians had wanted anything from these people, they’d have taken it—they likely used the Cinder King as an intermediary more out of convenience than anything else.

“We don’t need anything,” the man said to the trio of Beaconites. “You may go now; continue your own squabbles. We’re not interested in interfering.”

“You could destroy the Cinder King’s ship,” Zellion said, feeling the need to try once more. “The sun will soon rise. You could take this people in only until the light passes us. You…you could do *something*?”

“You are welcome to stay and take our offer, Rosharan,” the woman said, her attention trailing away. “We’ve heard your plea. That’s all that we’re required to do by interplanetary law. The locals will need to see to their own troubles.”

The man nodded, then gestured toward the elevator, his posture stern. They didn’t look armed, but Zellion knew from experience that groups like this were far from weak, even the scientists. Though he’d said he’d prefer a physical fight earlier, he doubted he could take this entire group. If he even had the heart to try. Which right now…he just didn’t.

“You were right, Zellion,” Rebeke whispered, still kneeling. “You tried to warn us. There is no refuge here.”

“I…” He looked back to them, expecting to see anger and dismay at this betrayal.

Their expressions of resignation hurt even more.

“You tried,” Contemplation said to him with a nod. “You did everything we asked of you and more. Zellion, there is no need for that look of sorrow. This was the direction we’ve been pointed for many rotations.”

“It was a fond dream,” Confidence said, taking Rebeke by the arm and pulling her back. “It’s not a sanctuary at all, is it? These are offworlders, like you?”

“Yes,” Zellion said. “I’m sorry. They’re here to study your sun. This ship isn’t that big.”

“Ship,” Rebeke said. “It’s…a ship.”

He nodded.

That seemed enough to explain it to them. They knew; they had heard. They retreated to the elevator. He wanted to go with them, but he hesitated

before entering.

"What do you think, Aux?" he whispered.

I think, the knight says, that we have gotten exactly what we deserve from this exchange.

Wisely put. He met Contemplation's eyes and knew he wasn't going with them. What point was there in going up to die? He needed to keep running. That was what he *did*.

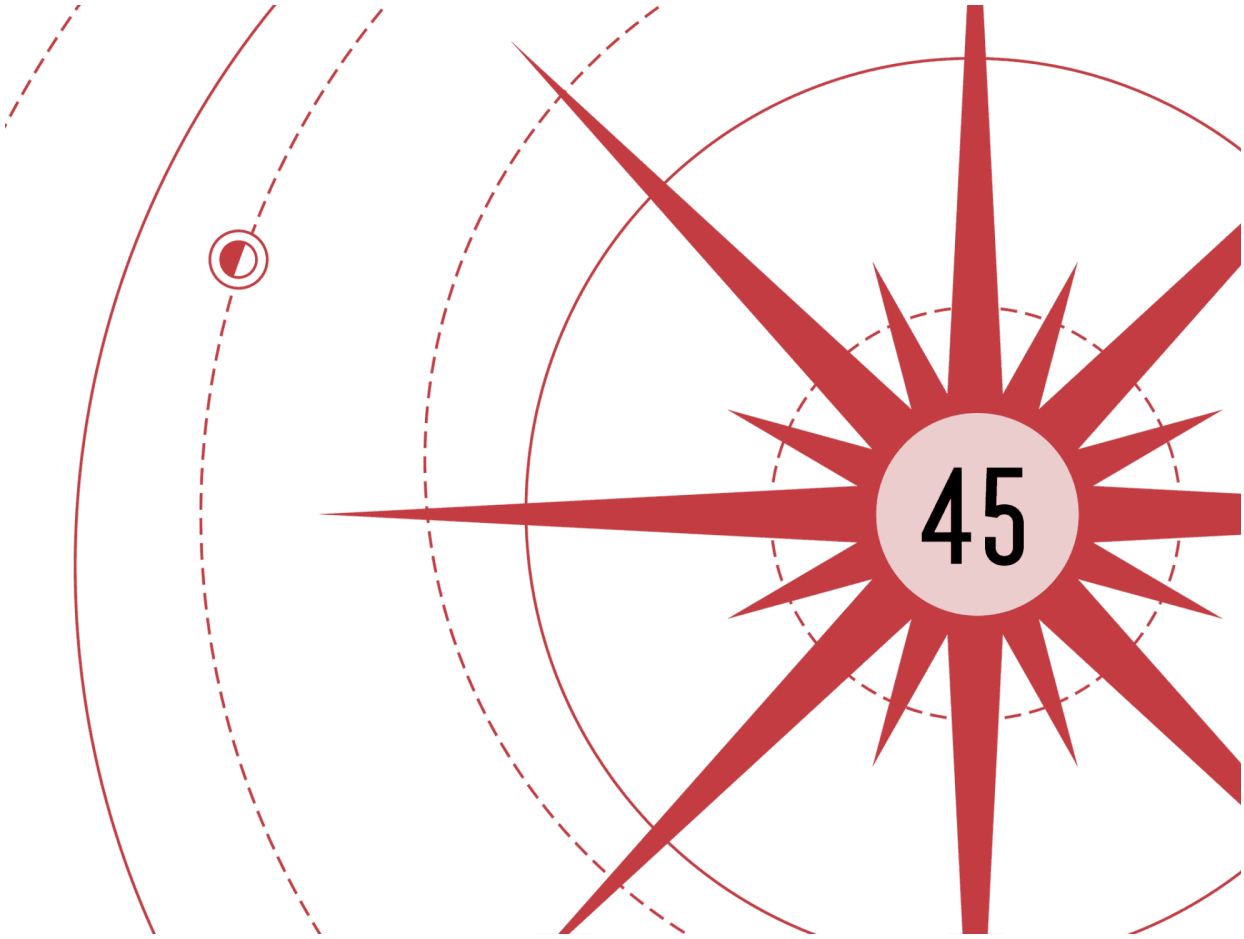
This was why it was better not to get involved. A part of him had been preparing for this all along, had tried to keep a distance between him and them. The realist in him took charge, insisting that it was time to be done.

"Stay," Contemplation said to him in a heartbreakingly soft, caring way. "Stay with your kind."

The door closed, then carried them back up to the surface. On a monitor, Zellion watched the Cinder King's forces creep closer, and this time no blast from beneath rose to frighten them off.

The Beaconites were out of power, out of resources, exhausted, and defeated. It was over.

Zellion…Nomad…sighed, then settled down in a place by the wall, closed his eyes, and—for once—let himself rest.



SITTING WAS TOO easy. And that made it hard.

Head tipped back. Eyes closed. Breathing even. It let Nomad hear the small sounds: the persistent, ubiquitous—yet oft inaudible—sounds of life. Fingers tapping on touchpads. The deep, musical voice of the ship's Awakened Steelmind giving a status report. People chuckling softly—the aftershocks of a joke that had been too quiet for him to hear.

But there was no motion. No place to run, no place to be. In moments like this, when he wasn't solving some problem or scrambling from one disaster to the next, Nomad could hear his own thoughts far too easily.

"Am I a coward, Aux?" he asked.

For being traumatized? I'm not the greatest expert on humans, but I hardly think that's an appropriate way of looking at what has happened to you.

"Even so," he whispered. He could *feel* that jar of pure Investiture on the desk nearby. He'd settled here, just within reach of it—but knew he'd be

watched at first. He hoped his slumped posture, his tired features, his lack of vibrance would put them at ease.

He couldn't steal it yet. Not *quite* yet.

"Report, sir," a voice said halfway across the room. "That ship in orbit earlier? Night Brigade."

Another voice, cursing softly. "Why are they here?"

"No idea. Shall we…ask?"

"No, don't reveal us. Hopefully their purpose is unrelated."

Tensely Nomad waited, wondering if they'd put it together. He listened for the telltale sounds of people turning toward him, of someone making the connection. Mysterious Rosharan mercenary. Night Brigade in orbit.

Nothing. Nomad wasn't surprised; the Night Brigade didn't like people to know why he was important. The Dawnshard was a weapon too valuable to sell. If you knew about it, you either hunted it yourself—or you ran far, far away.

When are you going to go for that power source? the hero asks.

"Not yet. Soon."

"Hey!" a voice said from another part of the room. "That Rosharan was right—this *is* interesting. We should have been watching."

He let his eyes flutter open. A worker sipping tea had turned on one of the large wall screens, displaying an overhead view of the landscape outside. So they *did* have a satellite system in place? Or perhaps drones?

The view zoomed in on the Beaconite ships flying for the shadow with all they had. Which wasn't much. Two gunships down, the last two trying—awkwardly—to dogfight.

"Are those ship-to-ship guns?" a woman asked. "When did they discover those? I thought we were withholding that technology until later."

Nomad stood up, entranced. Maybe…maybe they…

One gunship went down. Another pilot—maybe Zeal—dead. And the rest…even from the distant perspective, he saw Charred dropping from approaching enemy ships onto the transports. He couldn't hear the ultimatum, but he wasn't surprised when the surviving ships executed a landing.

Surrender. The people of Beacon had, at long last, given up.

It was a death sentence. But what choice did they have?

He stumbled against a desk, realizing he'd been walking forward unconsciously, hands making fists. Was this really who he was? The man

who ran *away*? Was that what he'd been trained to be? Was that who he *wanted* to be?

He couldn't help it. He whispered the words, the old words of his oaths.

Nothing happened.

He slunk back to his wall, where he dropped to sit, then huddled down, cheek to the floor. Exhausted.

Wait, Auxiliary said. *Wait. I thought that would work. I thought…if you wanted it back…*

"You wanted a revelation in light." Nomad squeezed his eyes shut.

Well, yes. Why…

"Consequences," he whispered. "I walked away from my oaths. I made the decision. And now…now there are consequences."

Why, though? You've never told me why you walked away after leaving Roshar. After all we'd been through together. You abandoned all you'd followed. Why would you do that?

Was it time? Time for the deepest, hardest truth—the answer that felt like teeth on pavement to acknowledge?

"I don't know," he said.

Liar.

"Not this time," Nomad whispered. "I *don't know*, Auxiliary. I just…did it. I can't explain my mindset. I can't justify it. I disavowed my oaths. It's the choice I made. But I didn't have a reason."

You have to. Everything has a reason.

Here was why he'd never tried to explain. For all his apparent humanity, Auxiliary was a creature of Investiture. Immortal. Slow to change.

Nomad huddled down further, pulling into a ball against the cold steel as he heard others in the room discussing the Cinder King's capture of the rogue city. He heard them noting how ominous it must feel to have an entire *city* descend upon you. Union had arrived.

Nomad… Sigzil. I don't understand.

"Humans," Nomad whispered, "are…inconsistent sometimes. We do what we feel. We can't explain it. I look back on the choice I made, and it feels entirely unlike me. But I did it; *I* made the choice. In the heat of a moment.

"It doesn't matter if it's what I wanted to do or what—logically—I should have done. The consequences stand. This…this is who I am."

He couldn't go back. He had to move forward. Keep going. He'd gotten *so good* at staying ahead, at moving, at…at running.

Why, then, was he in the *exact same place*?

He put his hands to his skull, digging his fingers into the skin. How could he run so hard and never get anywhere? The journey was supposed to be the important part, wasn't it?

Why, then, was he so miserable?

Part of him wanted to burst out of this place and go looking for the Beaconites, but what good was that? He couldn't make a home for them, a safe place. And if he got caught by the Night Brigade, it could mean the deaths of millions.

He had no answers. He didn't know his destination. Maybe that was why he was so lost. Hard to be anything else if you didn't know where you were going.

It wasn't a revelation in light. More, one in tears.

The room had fallen silent. He forcibly ripped himself away from his self-loathing, looking up long enough to see why. The Scadrians had mostly turned to watch the screen with the Beaconites, where the Charred were *retreating* toward Union—the massive city hovering in the near distance. At first, hope sparked—but like an ember from a fire released into the cold, hungry night, that hope died immediately.

The Charred had taken the sunhearts from Beacon's ships. They were leaving the people alone in the growing grass. Lit by too much light. The sun, never resting, was close to rising again. The Cinder King was going to leave the *entire town's* worth of people as offerings. Nearly one hundred and thirty-five souls.

The brutality of it was minimal on the grand scale; Nomad had just been thinking of the deaths of millions, the fall of planets. Yet there was a terrible *personal* cruelty to this event. Even the Scadrians picked up on it, every single one of them staring at the screen in silence. The postures of the Beaconites, falling to their knees in sorrow and terror. The abject abandonment of Union cruising away, leaving them behind, deaf to their pleas.

The Cinder King certainly had learned his lessons in tyranny well. Granted, that wasn't the sort of thing humans needed mentoring in. Too many of them could intuit how to be terrible all on their own. He'd been there himself.

Soon the screen had drawn the attention of everyone in the room except the most focused workers. An opportunity. The glowing Investiture Cell was right within Nomad's reach. He stood up, and nobody glanced his way.

He could take it and be gone in a moment.

He didn't.

He…he couldn't.

Are…we going to do anything? the knight asks his faithful squire.

"Yes," Nomad said. "We're going to watch and witness."

The words drew the attention of a nearby scientist—a woman with a ponytail who had been too interested in her work on a pair of sunhearts to be distracted by the screen. But she found him interesting enough, apparently.

"Who were you talking to?" the woman asked him, narrowing her eyes. "I thought you said you were unoathed. Do you have a spren?"

Damnation. He'd grown careless. These people could see the signs he hadn't needed to hide from the Beaconites.

"Just an old habit," he said. "It's nothing. What are you doing there? Are you transferring Investiture between two different sunhearts?"

"Yes!" she said, sitting back, displaying the age-old joy of a scientist who was pleased to find someone who actually cared about her work. "We recharged this one earlier. We're studying how much we can stuff into a single sunheart."

Recharged.

"You *recharged* a sunheart?" he asked, numb.

"Well, of course. Using that sunlight."

"The people have tried that," he said. "They told me. Leaving out a used sunheart doesn't do anything…" He stood up straighter. "Wait. It has to do with the strange current of this world, doesn't it? The way the core of the planet draws Investiture and heat from the sun? Sucking it down, like it's creating an electric circuit?"

"Yes!" the woman said, looking at him more closely. "How did you know? That took us *months* to figure out."

"The sunhearts don't recharge normally…" he said. "But the ground melts. People go aflame. Anything trapped *between* the sun and the core is like…like interference between two opposite electric poles." He looked upward at the lights in the ceiling. Modern ones, but reminiscent of those from long ago.

"An incandescent bulb," he whispered. "I thought of it earlier. It glows when current passes through the filament—but not because the filament is good at conducting. Rather the opposite. That filament *resists* and loses energy as heat and light. Radiating it. That's what makes a light bulb work.

"Normal sunhearts…the Investiture just passes through them, doesn't it? That's why nothing happens if you leave a used one buried. But when

they're formed in the first place, it's because a soul is resisting—causing the Investiture there to flare. Like the light of a light bulb. That's what captures all that power and leaves behind a sunheart."

The woman folded her arms on the table. "Yes," she said. "Have you been intercepting our communications? Is that why you know this?"

"How do you do it?" he asked, ignoring her question. "How do you recharge them? Wait. You put something else into them, something to be burned away by the sunlight? That temporarily blocks the circuit—or offers resistance to it."

"Some heat from a local works," she said, studying him. "We have a few captives. They prime the sunhearts with a little of their heat, then we leave the sunhearts out. It works. Use some special Investiture instead, and you get a corrupted cinderheart to make the Charred."

Storms, that made sense. It was a simple answer to recharging the sunhearts, but one that would take either happenstance or a deep understanding of Investiture to try. No wonder the people of Canticle had never discovered it.

"Are you an arcanist?" the woman asked, her frown deepening.

"Nothing so grand," he said, staring at her powerfully glowing sunheart, charged far beyond its regular capacity. "You realize this solves most of their problems, right?"

"Making Charred?"

"No, the first part! If the people out on the surface knew, they could recharge their power sources endlessly. No more sacrifices. Just a little bleeding of their warmth to prime depleted sunhearts, then bury them and return to find them glowing again!"

The researcher shrugged. "I suppose."

"Storms!" Nomad said, hand to his forehead. "Why didn't you *tell* them?"

"Why would we reveal such a useful secret?"

He had to do something. He had to *tell* them.

The air broke around him—the fragments of his ancient armor trying to push into reality again. Some from his first oaths, some from his second. Either way, it was the absolute *wrong* time for them to be doing that.

"Oathed after all…" the woman said, noting the shards. "Arcanist… Rosharan… Dark skin…" Her eyes went wide.

Damnation.

Nomad lunged for the Investiture Cell, but she snatched it off the table and backed away, raising a hand and tapping the metal device on her glove.

Instead he snatched the sunheart she'd been working on, the one they'd overcharged.

Fortunately he didn't have any metal on him, so—

He was thrown violently backward, Pushed by something at his waist. His metal belt buckle. Right.

He slammed into the wall.

"We have a problem!" the researcher shouted to the rest of the room. "I've read about this man! *He's* why the Night Brigade is here! Rusts, there's a bounty on his head big enough to buy a small *planet*."

The other Scadrians spun, looking away from the sad sight of the Beaconites—who had gathered in a huddle amid their fallen and powerless ships—as the sunrise loomed. Nomad ripped off his belt before it could be used against him again, then he summoned Auxiliary in his flashiest form: the enormous, six-and-a-half-foot Blade, wavy, with ornamentation near the hilt.

Most people had never seen a Shardblade in person, but they'd heard the stories. Even a group like this—who could have overwhelmed him with their technology—froze at the sight of it.

"I'm leaving," he told them, voice harsh. "You get to choose. You can stand in my way. Or you can continue to breathe."

"Leaving?" one of the Scadrian leaders said. "It's less than five minutes to sunrise, idiot."

Five minutes from us? Auxiliary said. *Then the Beaconites have a good fifteen before it reaches them, as they flew a short distance before being downed. We can work with that.*

Nomad backed up to the elevator, enormous sword in one hand, sunheart in the other. "Operate it," he said to them.

Nobody moved.

"Operate it," he said, "or I will *cut my way out*."

"You'd destroy the integrity of the hull!" a woman cried. "We'd be killed by the—"

"Then don't make me do it!"

Storms. What was he doing?

He didn't have an explanation. That's how people were sometimes.

The door to the elevator opened. He stepped inside, dismissing Auxiliary —as in this shape, he was big enough to be awkward. The elevator worked, though, and the Scadrians didn't try anything. It spit him out onto a

landscape that had changed dramatically in the minutes since he'd left, an entire forest of spindly trees growing up from the mud.

Nomad—Zellion—looked through them toward the building sunlight. Storms. They'd said under five minutes, but he doubted he had that long. He turned and started running.

It's what he did. It had always been enough before. This time, he'd rounded the entire planet, but found himself where he'd begun.

Sunlight rising. He felt it on his back. The trees around him started wilting. Withering.

You can't outrun it, Auxiliary said. Was that…soft nuance to his voice? It had been years since Zellion had heard that. *Even you can't outrun that light.*

He kept trying, sunheart clutched to his chest.

Zellion, Auxiliary said, *you'll need to fly to reach them.*

"I can't!" he shouted. "I…I can't, Aux. I've *tried*."

The sunlight grew more oppressive. Trees darkened, smoldering.

Zellion kept running.

You're a better man than you pretend to be, Auxiliary said. *Even still. Even broken as you are.*

"I'm just a fool. A callous fool."

We both know that isn't true. Because the smart thing to do, the callous thing, would have been to attack Beacon the moment you got to it. Steal their sunhearts, leave their ships stranded. You didn't do that.

No. He hadn't. Because whatever he said, he was still a man, not a monster.

Zellion. My friend. You're worth saving.

He started crying as he ran.

When you reach them, Auxiliary said, *make sure they know the secret. Make sure you save them, Zellion.*

"But—"

Listen to me. Just listen. I can give you a little burst of power, like we discussed.

"No! I'll use the power from this sunheart."

And will that make you fly again?

No, it wouldn't. Because it wasn't power he lacked. It was something else.

I will make you what you were. For a short time. I am the leftover strength of oaths sworn. I am the truth you once knew. Take it again, for the briefest time, and soar.

He felt warmth begin to spread through him. It was a different kind of Investiture…drawn from the remnant of *Auxiliary's soul*.

I will burn away only myself, Auxiliary said. *My personality. That should leave you with my body, the weapon, to still use. This is my destination, but not yours.*

"You can't do this, Aux. Please."

You don't get to decide. I know about consequences. I understand that you betrayed your oaths.

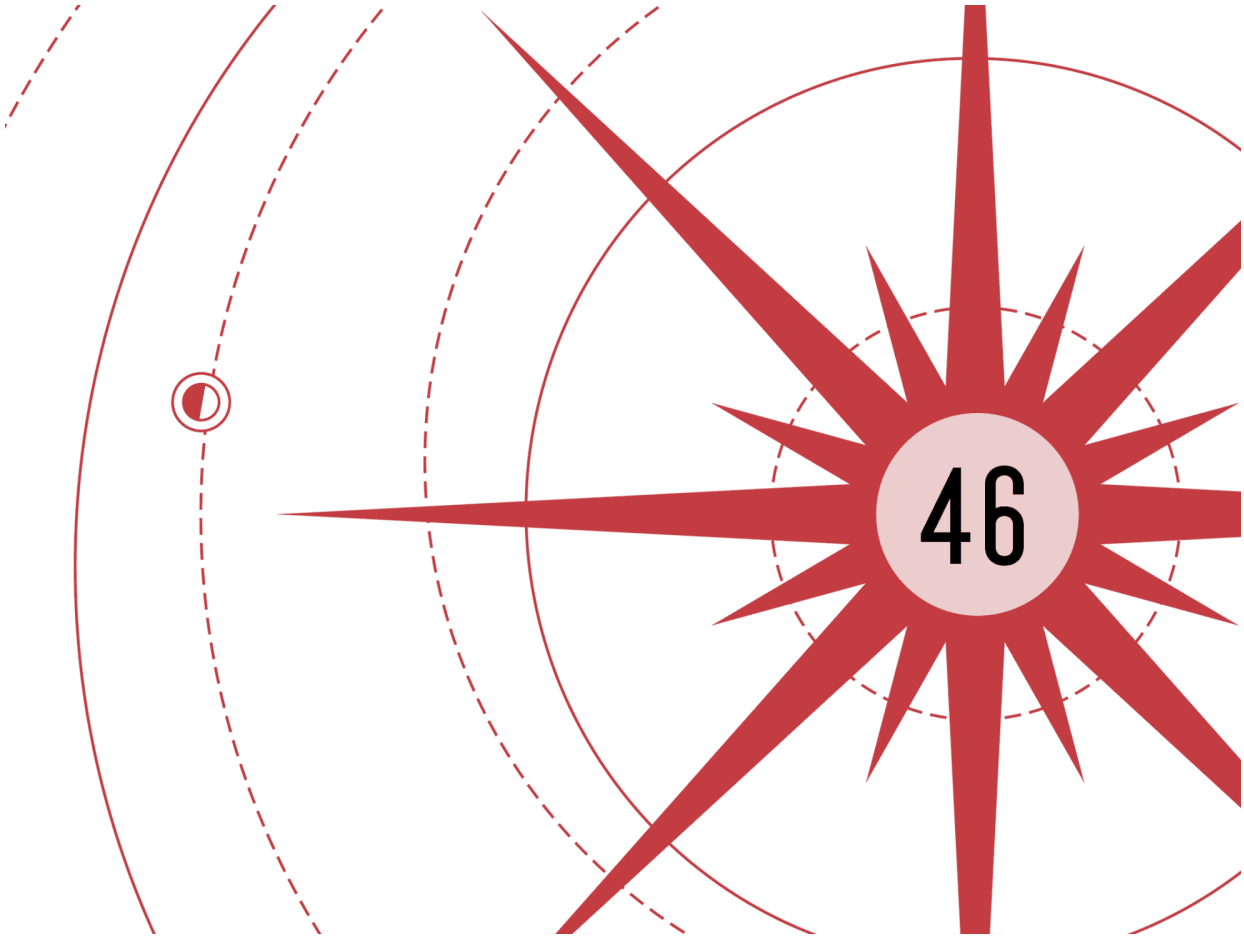
But here's the thing, Zellion. Here's what you never have understood. I also swore to be better than I was. I became a Knight Radiant. I spoke the words.

And whatever you did, I never betrayed my *oaths.*

You protect those people, Zellion. I've carried you as far as I can. You'll have to find the rest of the way on your own.

An awesome, familiar power welled up inside him. As the sun finally broke the horizon—causing the forest to burst into flame—armor formed around Zellion.

And his eyes came alight.



ELEGY WALKED AFTER the Cinder King as he stepped to the edge of Union, flying in an imperious way above the landscape, watching over the fallen people of Beacon.

Several men in white coats dragged Rebeke over as well. She was the only person of Beacon other than Elegy that the Charred had recovered. Elegy hadn't initially been certain why he'd picked Rebeke to spare. Now, however, she could feel his emotions, and she understood. He *boiled* with satisfaction. With the thrill of having such power over so many people.

His cinderheart glowed fiercely beneath his shirt, and he smiled with unbridled glee at the horror in Rebeke's expression. She fell to her knees at the side of the flying city, looking down at the huddled remnants of Beacon, gathered on the ground. Fewer than one hundred and thirty-five souls, surrounding the ruins of their once proud, rebellious town.

Yes, that was it. He was happy to have a deliberate kind of power over Elegy's family line, and its last living member.

In the distance, the sun rose. Light moved across the land as a sheet of flame.

Elegy stood with six other Charred. She was too new to understanding people to know for certain, but she thought that maybe she'd fooled the Cinder King. When the Beaconites had decided to surrender, she'd made a good show of lashing out at them too—in full sight of the other Charred who came to secure the place. They'd delivered her up to the Cinder King, who had touched her cinderheart with his fingers and spoken some words.

That hadn't done anything, but she'd pretended it had. She'd calmed, because she could still feel what he *wanted* of her, even if she didn't have to *do* it. She'd felt his pleasure at her immediate obedience, and she now stood quietly—as if completely under his control.

They hadn't searched her. Why would they?

So they didn't know about the sliver of a sunheart that Zellion had given her. She wouldn't, it turned out, need it for herself.

Rebeke knelt at the edge of the city, shaking. Elegy continued to find her weakness curious. Before being taken as a Charred, had Elegy been similarly fragile? Though she would not say it aloud, she was glad for what had been done to her. For the strength she now had.

"Please," Rebeke said, turning a tear-streaked face toward the Cinder King. "There's no need to do this. They can serve you well, great king."

"They *will* serve me," he said, oozing with self-satisfaction. "Your people will be the flames that carry my ships to conquer and unite even the farthest corridors. Once the other towns know the price of rebellion—once my people spread word of an entire city fallen to the sun—all will shrink and cower before me." He nodded, speaking as if only to himself. "This is how I will unify the world."

Rebeke slumped. Then curiously something changed about her posture. The Cinder King wasn't watching, but Elegy saw it. Saw the younger woman's hands ball to fists, her chin rise. She was going to attack him, wasn't she? Elegy nodded in approval. Though the act would be futile, it was bold. A better way to die.

Strangely, instead of attacking, Rebeke *spoke*.

"How did you know?" she asked.

Confusion from the Cinder King—Elegy could feel it.

"Know?" he asked.

"Know that I'd been leading Beacon all this time," she said. Then she pointed down to the rest of her people. The three old women knelt in the

center of the group, deep in prayer before the advancing sunlight. “How did you know those three were puppets, used to distract you? After you took Elegy, we knew we needed to hide what I was. Yet you’ve obviously seen through the ruse.”

“Yes, well,” the Cinder King said. “It was obvious.”

A lie? Why did he care to lie?

He doesn’t want to be seen as ignorant, Elegy realized. How curious. But why was Rebeke lying? What was she hoping to accomplish? Now he’d be *more* likely to kill her, not less.

Rebeke stood up and turned away from the people to meet his eyes. “You’ve made your point, Cinder King,” she said. “You have me, and you know what I am. I have bent before you. Collect the others, and I will tell them that I serve you.”

He paused, cocking his head.

“What’s better?” Rebeke asked. “The world knowing you can kill a city? Please—anyone could take the sunhearts from a group of straggling ships with no warriors. But if the world knew that even your greatest detractor—the leader who sought to overthrow you—eventually realized her power was nothing compared to yours… If they knew even *she* agreed to follow you, then nobody else would ever rebel.”

What was this ruse? Rebeke was no leader; she was weak and soft. Wasn’t she? Yet the Cinder King believed Rebeke’s lies. Elegy could feel it.

And…and Elegy found that she believed them a little herself.

“No,” the Cinder King said.

“Then kill me!” Rebeke said, stepping forward. “Bring the others here and make them watch me die! Think of the power you’ll feel, holding my throat in your hands, crushing the life from me as my people watch. Is that not the ultimate show of strength? Why kill them when you can make them *suffer*?”

Elegy gasped, and then immediately hoped she hadn’t betrayed herself. She couldn’t help it, however, watching Rebeke—short, completely without strength of arm, face streaked with tears—confront the Cinder King and *trick* him. Yes, Elegy could feel how seductive he found the thought of killing her in front of the Beaconites.

Rebeke, safest of them all at the moment, sought to give away her life for the others. She could not fight the Cinder King, but somehow she was close to *defeating* him. If he rescued the others and killed Rebeke…

Shades. Elegy had been wrong.

This wasn't weakness. In this realization, Elegy felt a strange calmness. Something that forced back her desire to rend and move and kill and fight.

This was strength. Rebeke was *stronger* than Elegy was.

The moment held, with the sunlight advancing—slowly but inevitably across the landscape—and Rebeke didn't break. She didn't look back. She committed to her gambit.

Until, at last, the Cinder King smiled.

"You almost," he said to her, "persuaded me. But I can see pain in your eyes. You *hurt* so terribly to know they're going to die. I will not be swayed by you. To do so would give you power over me."

Then she went for him, hands going for his eyes—but one of the Charred caught her before she'd taken a single step. Rebeke struggled, ranting, screaming. Her ploy collapsing. Her frustration boiling out.

Still, it had been a valiant effort. A soldier on a losing battlefield using the only weapon she had left: her life.

"You shouldn't have told me," the Cinder King said, "that you were their leader. I was planning to keep you as a trophy. Now that I know you've been leading the dissenters against me…well, I think you'll make a fine Charred. First, you can watch them die." He stepped closer to her as she struggled in the grip of the Charred. "This is true power. The power over life and death. The…"

He paused. He squinted toward the advancing sunlight.

Elegy followed his gaze, and even his Charred—as always, sensing his emotions—turned to look. The moment caught Rebeke too, who was allowed to twist and search the horizon. What had he seen?

The sunlight was close to the Beaconites—and as it advanced, it set aflame the plants and even the sky: a wave of destruction, fire, and light. Moving slowly by the scale of ships, but still faster than a person could run. The Beaconites should have tried anyway. Instead they huddled together, not wanting to leave stragglers and the young—wanting to die as one, not as a field of running individuals.

In that moment, Elegy could see the strength in that too.

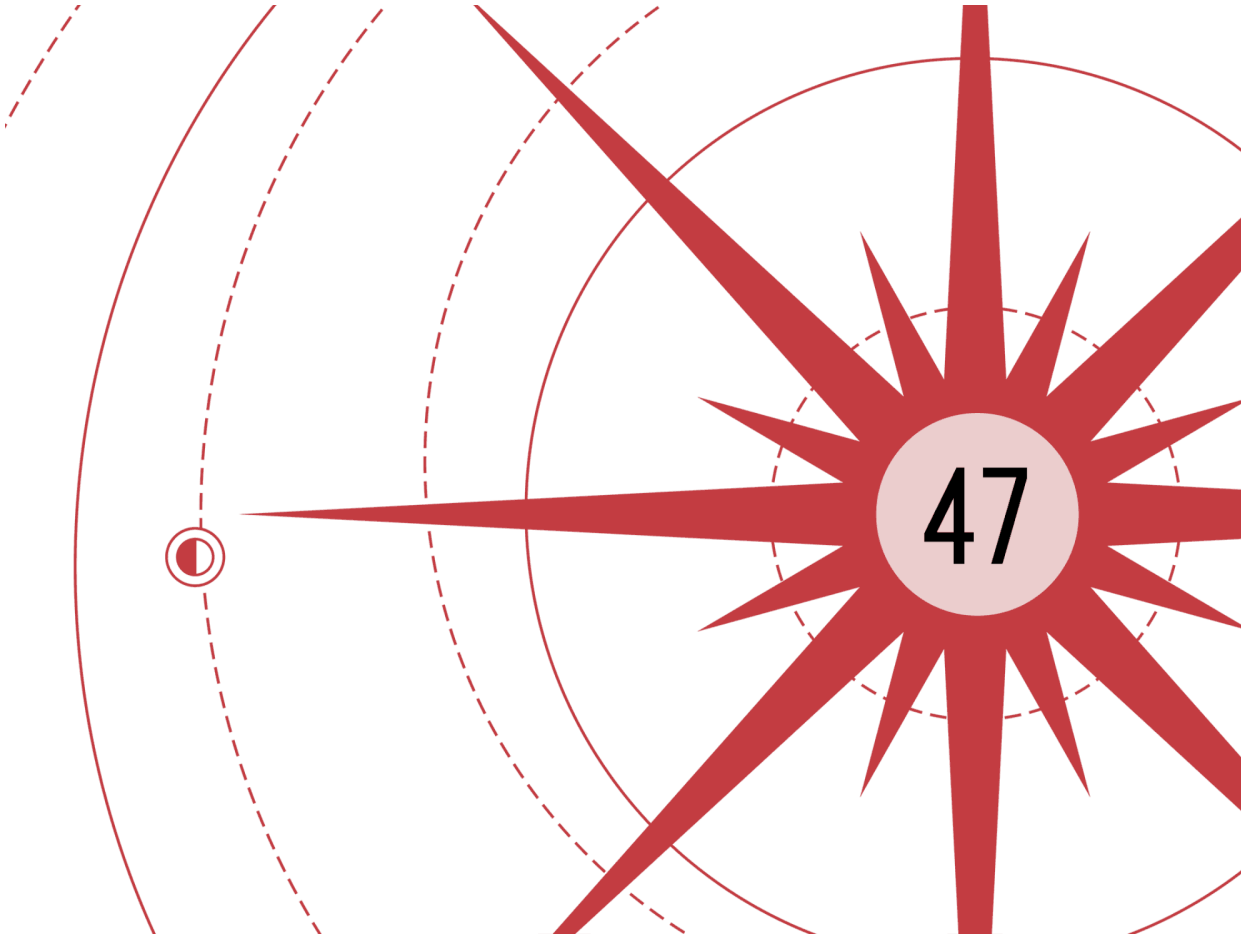
Together, they watched the advancing flames. A sky of red and orange, a brilliant death.

The fire undulated. The sheet of light rippled and changed.

Then a figure, high in the sky, exploded from the light, trailing fragments of fire and smoke, glowing like metal being forged. A living ember of light. Somehow, he'd *lived* through the inferno. Indeed, the very fire in the sky

seemed to arrange itself behind him into the shape of some symbol Elegy did not know. Roughly triangular, point down, with wings extending outward on either side.

"It's him," Rebeke whispered.



AS ZELLION EMERGED from the dawn, he found himself whole and unburned. The suit of armor, designed to maintain temperature and life support for the person it protected, had been able to withstand even the sunlight's terrible heat.

That gave him hope as he directed his flight toward the patch of huddled people who were perilously close to the advancing dawn. He soared, and part of him enjoyed this moment out of his former life, when he'd been a man who had deserved the skies.

But today's cost weighed him down, no matter how high he soared. "Aux," he whispered. "It worked."

There was no response. His companion all these years, the one who had started this journey with him, was dead. Well and truly gone. All Zellion had was Aux's corpse—in the form of a tool and a weapon. Storms, how that crushed him inside.

Zellion's failure was sealed now. Yet, for a moment, he was someone else. Someone who would do everything he could to respect his friend's dying command.

Defend those people.

He landed in an explosion of dirt, hitting with the force of a small meteor, and felt the power that Aux had given him run out. As he'd been warned, only a tiny bit had remained. Barely enough to contain Aux's personality. Dreams, ideas, and honor. Burned away in a moment. Zellion summoned Aux's body as a shield, and that still worked, as hoped.

He jogged through the middle of the crowd of awed people, and dismissed his helm—revealing his face to the chilly open air. Still, he knew—despite his armor being relatively sleek compared to some—he'd look like a hulking monster. They made way for him as he stomped to their perimeter.

"Is Solemnity Divine still here?" he shouted, stopping at the edge of the group, sweat trickling down his neck as he glanced at the sunlight. It was storming close—*again*.

"Zellion?" Solemnity Divine asked, breaking from the crowd. "It's true? You're—"

"Shave off a sliver of that," he said, tossing her the sunheart he'd taken from the Scadrians. "Then get it installed in the *Dawnchaser* and give the rest back to me. *Soon.*"

"Zellion?" Contemplation said, pushing forward, her black dyed locks spilling across her shoulders. "Is that a sunheart? We can fly to safety!"

He shook his head. "You fancy trying to get all these people on ships in the next minute or two? And even if you do, then what? The Cinder King will just stop them again. You're far too vulnerable."

"Then what?" she demanded. "If it pleases you, tell us your plan!"

Solemnity Divine tossed back the rest of the sunheart, then went running to install the sliver as asked. Zellion slotted the sunheart into a place he'd made on the back of the shield.

Please work, he thought. *Please let this be enough. Please.*

Power surged through the shield. Zellion planted it into the ground, then gave the command. It started to grow, expanding into a dome. Not transparent this time, as that would defeat the purpose. A large piece of metal, reflective on the outside. When he'd encased himself in this in the maelstrom, he'd been protected from the bulk of the heat. In this form, Auxiliary's corpse should be able to provide some of the same protections as his armor.

“What…” Contemplation stepped closer to him as the dome continued to grow. “Could it always do this?”

“No,” he said, then tapped the sunheart embedded into it. “It needs Investiture on a grand scale. This is a superpowered sunheart, *recharged* by the people inside the Refuge.”

She stared at it, then at him. “You can *recharge* them?” she whispered. “How?”

“There’s very little time. You know the invocation that takes heat and puts it into a sunheart?”

“Bold one on the threshold of death, take into your sunheart my heat, that I may bless those who still live,” she said. “It’s a prayer.”

“Yes,” he said. “Fill a sunheart with some of your heat as a seed, *then* leave it in the sun. It will respond like a person’s soul, burned away in a flash of power—and that will recharge the sunheart.”

“This means… This changes *everything*.”

“Take it to everyone, Contemplation,” he said. “Tell them this truth and change the world.”

“So simple…” she said. “How did we never see it?”

“Many of the greatest technological advances are simple at their core,” Zellion said.

The shield began to grow to cover the ground, forcing everyone to step up onto it, to protect them from the impending magma below. Storms, he hoped it wouldn’t be so violent that they were tossed about and harmed. There wasn’t much he could do about that right now. He watched the dome near completion, bringing darkness upon them, save for a hole at the far end. He’d leave through that, then seal it.

“We will survive this,” Contemplation whispered. “Thank you. I knew you would come back.”

“That’s odd,” he said, “because I didn’t.”

“Adonalsium did,” she replied. “I prayed to him for this to happen.”

He grimaced, and Contemplation regarded him, their faces visible by the light of the nearby sunheart. His armor was glowing too, though not in either of its customary shades of blue. Instead it glowed with the light of embers—the sunlight might have damaged it, because little flecks of red-orange light continued to burn all across it—and when he moved, he trailed smoke.

“I’ve noticed your expression when we mention Adonalsium.”

“Contemplation,” he said. “I don’t mean to be contrary, but Adonalsium? He—”

“He’s dead?” she asked. “Yes, we know. Did you think we had no idea of the story? The Shattering? The Shards?”

“I…yes. So I assumed. Since you still talk about him and…well, you know, pray.”

“Our faith,” she said, “is that this is all part of some plan. It’s not about everything happening the way we want—but trusting that it *is* happening the way *someone* wants.”

“I find that a little naive.”

“And yet,” the old woman said, “here you are. Saving us.”

“That was because of Auxiliary,” he said. “My shield here, who gave up his last vestige of life so I could come to you in time.”

“And what was Auxiliary?”

“My spren. A…quantum of power, Investiture, come to life.”

“And where did that being come from?”

From…a Shard of Adonalsium. Storms.

Well, a part of him still believed in Yaezir and the emperor, despite all that had happened. He told himself that he’d never seen them as infallible, and that was the difference that kept him from being a blind zealot compared to many religious people he met. But then, that might just be rationalization.

He nodded to Contemplation as the dome’s floor finished near his exit.

“They took Rebeke,” Contemplation said. “And Elegy.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” Contemplation said. “I know you don’t want the title I tried to give you. But today you came to us when we needed it most. By choice. Thank you, Zellion. Sunlit Man.”

“It is time to start moving forward again,” he said, standing up straight. “Teach everyone how to recharge sunhearts. Make sure the news spreads.”

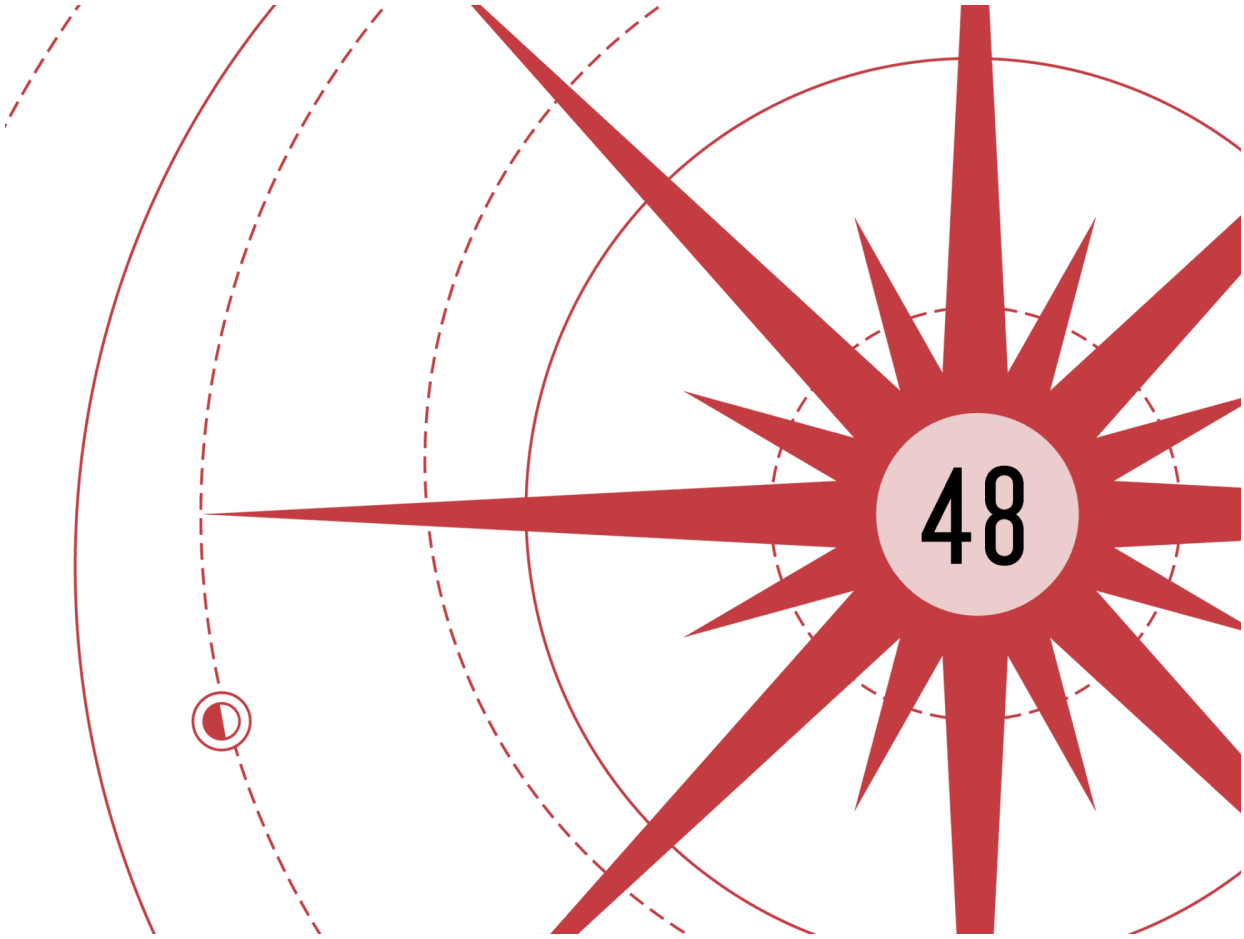
“We will,” she said. “Unless the Cinder King stops us.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Zellion said. “I’ll deal with him.”

He took off running for the ship as Solemnity Divine flew it over for him. A few moments later, he zipped out—leaving the dome sealed behind him, hoping it would maintain life support inside—and flew toward Union.

Sunlight enveloped the dome, respecting Auxiliary’s last wish as he literally became the wall that held back destruction from the Beaconites. There was nothing else Zellion could do for them directly, but they did still need him. Not for salvation, but for something he knew far more intimately.

Killing.



ELEGY HELPED AS the Charred pulled the weapon into place. A large gun, taken from one of the Beaconite ships for the Cinder King's engineers to study. Instead they now settled the huge weapon down on the rim of his floating city, and a few engineers buzzed about, powering it with a sunheart.

The Cinder King barked in annoyance at them as he climbed up beside the weapon, taking a control device from a nearby official. The engineers were mostly worried about recoil, and had piled a great deal of cushioning behind the weapon—which was wedged against a wall. From the way they spoke, Elegy was hoping she'd get to see the Cinder King thrown overboard as it shook. Perhaps he would get mashed beneath it, which would be amusing.

Sadly the gun fired without difficulty—delivering a ball of glowing energy into the distant dome. It bounced off, but it proved that the system worked. He had them move it to point at Zellion's approaching ship.

Elegy felt a surge of excitement. She'd hoped for something like this.

She shot Rebeke, held captive by a nearby Charred, a grin. Rebeke, in turn, seemed shocked. Had she believed Elegy's fakery too? That gave her even *more* of a thrill.

This next part would be extra fun. Before the Cinder King could fire his weapon at Zellion, Elegy attacked. Not him, but the other Charred.

She started with the one holding Rebeke. Slipping the little fragment of sunheart from her waistband, Elegy lunged and pressed it against the cinderheart of the nearby Charred, then spoke Zellion's incantation. Immediately the Charred dropped Rebeke, and his cinderheart's color lightened. He stumbled back, gasping, his link to the Cinder King disrupted.

Elegy pulled Rebeke away as that Charred—suddenly allowed to do whatever he wanted—chose the next Charred in line and immediately attacked. Elegy grinned wider and freed a second Charred, then leaped back as that woman went into a frenzy and started laying about with her cudgel.

Elegy only had time to free one more before the Cinder King realized what she was doing. "Treason most foul!" he shouted, shoving aside a freed Charred who tried to attack him. "What is this? How…"

Then he focused again on Zellion's ship. Cursing, the Cinder King fired—but he'd hesitated just long enough. The shots hit behind the *Dawnchaser*, which maintained a steady pace toward Union. It was remarkable, she thought, what that little vessel had survived.

"Kill that one!" he shouted, pointing at Elegy.

The three remaining Charred went for her, but the three she had loosed were causing chaos, attacking officials and civilians who had gathered to watch. The Cinder King was forced to pull two Charred away from attacking Elegy to protect himself.

Others came running to the scene, and soon she struggled gloriously against four opponents. She lost track of Rebeke in the chaos, and was forced backward toward the edge of the city as she defended herself.

She did…fine. The others had a frenzy that she understood, but she'd been learning to think, and that served her well. She backed away strategically and put the large gun between herself and the others. As they scrambled around it, she was able to spring up and climb over it, dropping down so she could briefly engage one of the Charred alone.

She broke his leg with her cudgel, then was fiddling with her sunheart fragment when a voice called out from behind her. "You are able to think for yourself?" the Cinder King asked. "Do you *remember*? Does it *hurt* if you hear this?"

Rebeke screamed.

Elegy looked to see Rebeke in his grip—his bare hand on her neck, leeching away her heat. Strangely it *did* hurt Elegy—and anger her—to see that. Rebeke was…someone that should be protected. Elegy howled, but then was tackled from behind by one of the other Charred, her sunheart fragment slipping from her fingers and bouncing away.

"Yes, it *does* hurt you, doesn't it?" the Cinder King said. "Curious. Well, perhaps it will hurt even more for you to know what I'm going to do to her. I'll make her into one of you, take away her mind and her soul, and replace it with devotion to *me alone*. When you next meet her, she will try to kill you. Does *that* hurt, Elegy?"

Elegy howled in frustration, losing control, battering at the Charred that had her pinned down. Then another one arrived and slammed his cudgel into her head. She withstood the pain, though, keeping her attention on Rebeke—whom the Cinder King released and pushed into the arms of an official. Rebeke sagged, most of her heat drained.

Another official whispered something urgent to the Cinder King, and he looked out toward the approaching Zellion. "We'll need to go back to the old plan for dealing with him," the Cinder King said. "Is it still ready?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. Faith, go to the command center and put the city into lockdown—no ships leaving. I don't want him slipping out of my grip. The rest of you, with me."

Elegy threw aside the Charred holding her, then caught the cudgel as another tried to pound her head. She even kicked at the leg of a third one as he arrived to help. But she saw at least a dozen more running up the street toward them, summoned to the will of their master.

He walked off at a brisk pace, joined by his officials in white, who pulled a weakened Rebeke after them.

They left Elegy to die. But they didn't realize. She could plan now. She had begun to care. She wouldn't just fight until she was killed. So she broke free from the grips of those coming for her.

And she ran.

She ran with full strength of limb and determination. Away from the Charred. Behind, they howled in frustration at her escape. Though part of her longed to engage them, to fight and claw and batter and kill, she *ran* instead. Farther along the rim of the city until she was able to vault herself up and grab the top of the roof of one of the smaller buildings. A frightened

woman closed the window as Elegy reached the roof, then turned and leaped over the street to the next ship.

Below, Charred clambered over one another to try to reach her. But, not working together, they hampered one another's efforts. Elegy moved back the way she'd come, bounding from rooftop to rooftop until she'd returned to where she'd started. Here, she hopped down and grabbed her sunheart fragment off the ground. Then she ran over two streets to a specific point she'd spied earlier: an open portion of steel deck with no buildings nearby.

Approaching Charred from all directions forced her against the edge. She backed to the very lip, growling softly, staring them down. Then she felt the city shake as something impacted it from below. A moment later, a figure sprang over the side—a figure in smoldering armor, trailing smoke. He landed in front of her, metal feet sparking on the metal street. Then he stood up tall, even more intimidating in the armor than he'd been without it.

"You all right?" he asked her, his voice projected somehow out of the armor. He glanced at her, and the slit at the front glowed a deep red-orange, the color of coals—or sunhearts. The suit seemed simultaneously archaic and modern. It was sleek, with no gaps at the joints that she could see. Yet it was also a reminder of a different time, when soldiers had gone to war encased like this.

"Yeah," she said, breathing heavily. "I planned. I saw you flying toward this spot. I *planned*, Zellion."

"Good."

"They took Rebeke that way," she said, pointing past the gathered Charred, who had retreated at his appearance.

"Was the Cinder King with them?"

"Yes."

"Then that's the way I'm going," he said.

"Do you have your weapon?"

"No," he said. "It's keeping the people of Beacon alive right now—and summoning it would mean instant death to them."

"Then we're both unarmed," she said.

"I wouldn't say that," he told her as the Charred started to move in. "I'll assume none of you have seen Shardplate in action before. Stand back and enjoy this next part. I'll make us a path."

He stomped forward, armor clanging against the deck, and met the first Charred head-on, swinging in a powerful uppercut. The Charred—still accustomed to powering through hits—didn't bother to dodge. So Zellion's

punch connected and tossed the Charred like a doll over the nearby ships to land somewhere in the distance.

He spun and seized another, tossing her into several others coming his way. He moved like a demolition machine, using the Charred as weapons against one another. In an incredible sequence of destruction, he threw them, stomped them, *broke* them.

Unlike before, however, the Cinder King wasn't there to be frightened. So they kept coming. Elegy watched in awe, then noticed the cracks appearing in Zellion's armor. He was a terrible force, with strength like a machine, but he couldn't stop them all. They got in occasional hits with cudgels or machetes—and those blows left cracks in the armor, like it was made of glass.

Shaking free of her awe, Elegy ran forward and began to cleanse the wounded Charred's cinderhearts, one at a time. They, once freed, tried to kill her. But she ducked away, leaving them to attack other Charred instead, increasing the chaos.

In an explosion of light, part of the strange armor actually *burst* beneath a hit, spraying sparks and glowing metal chunks. It was one of the shoulder pieces, but Zellion kept fighting, breaking bones, and tossing Charred until —at last—the street fell still. Not silent—no, there were too many moans and screams from frustrated, wounded Charred for that. But the supply of attackers was depleted, like a gun running out of energy.

Zellion slumped forward, and she could hear him breathing deeply from within his helmet. Then his armor began to disintegrate, vaporizing to smoke, leaving him—in seconds—exposed. He struggled to his feet and picked up a fallen machete.

"Can you bring it back?" Elegy asked, approaching him on a deck slick with blood.

"I don't know," he said. "Not soon, I suspect. I'm…not sure how the relationship stands between me and my armor. But it felt good to bear it again." He looked around at the destruction he'd wrought. "Poor souls. Taken and forced into this."

"They enjoyed it," she promised. "You gave them a fight like they've never known. Besides, some escaped." She pointed to the ones she'd freed, who had made their way down side alleys, looking for fights with common civilians.

Maybe…she should not be happy about that. Yes, she could see from his frown that perhaps…that was a bad thing.

“We need to find the Cinder King,” he said.

“I know where they’ll take Rebeke,” she said. “He wants to make her into a Charred. I was born in that very place.”

Zellion nodded, following her lead as they moved through the city, which had grown quiet as the people hid. Near the center of Union was their Reliquary, where the Chorus was kept. Beside it was the Hall of Burning, where the Cinder King made his Charred.

Together, she and Zellion burst out into the open ground surrounding these two buildings. And there was the Cinder King. Standing off to the right, partway down a wide street, hands on hips. Waiting.

“I’ll handle him,” Zellion said, hefting his machete. “You go rescue your sister.”

“I want to fight,” she snapped.

“I know. But is that what you *need*?”

“They’re different?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding to the Cinder King, who waved him forward. “He’s planning something. A trap. Can you outthink him?”

“No,” she admitted. “But I can push through the trap, whatever it is! I can kill him.”

“Can you, Elegy?” Zellion met her eyes. “Should you?” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Right now, you need to give up that fight to save your sister instead. That’s what your people need. That’s the path *you* need to be on.”

She didn’t feel his words. But she…she believed them anyway. She nodded.

“Go,” he said. “When you rescue Rebeke, tell her something for me. There is a way to recharge sunhearts. Put some heat in an empty one and leave it out in the sun, and when you come back around, it will be renewed. The days of sacrifices are done. The Beaconites know, but I want as many to hear as possible. They deserve this truth.”

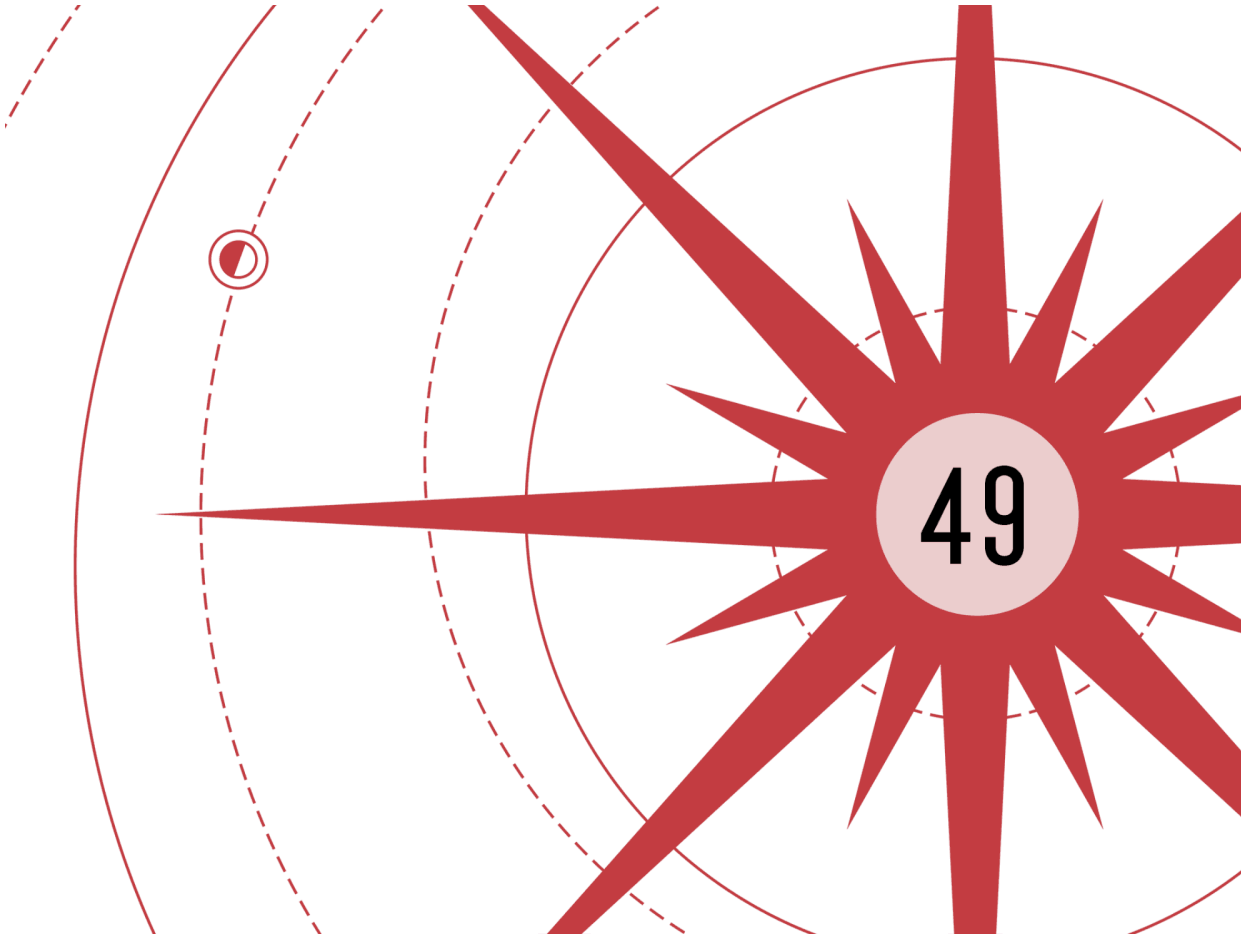
“I will.”

“Oh, and Elegy? Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For giving me someone worthy to fight alongside,” he said, turning toward the Cinder King. “I think that helped me remember which path *I* need to be on.”

With that, they parted toward their separate destinies.



"WHAT DO YOU think, Aux?" Zellion said, walking calmly toward the Cinder King. "Do you spot snipers?"

No response. Damnation. It hurt anew when he remembered.

He stopped within shouting distance of the Cinder King, feeling strangely exposed without his armor. A short time back in it, and already he felt reliant?

"I'm here to give you that fight you offered!" Zellion called to the man. "Do you still want it?"

"Indeed!" the Cinder King shouted back. "Hand to hand. You and me. No interference by others! Isn't that a tradition among your people? A trial of honor, one on one?"

It was more of an Alethi thing actually, not an Azish one. His people preferred to settle differences with extended court battles and flowery legal speeches. But that distinction was irrelevant, because he doubted the Cinder King intended to play fair—no matter what he said.

So Zellion was ready for the snipers even without Auxiliary to spot them. He dodged toward the wall of a building as the shots hit behind him. Not Invested shots, though. They'd switched to regular slug throwers? Why?

He neared the wall he intended to use as cover, but a dozen officers in white coats broke through nearby windows and doors, then opened fire at him with pellets that hurt, but didn't pierce. They battered him, weakened him, as Charred surrounded him and came in swinging with clubs. Zellion struggled, pushed, fought back—until one of them wrapped something around his wrist.

Ice flooded his veins. His heat leeched away. He wavered, but didn't fall—because the bracer shut off a second later. They hadn't wanted to knock him out, just leave him weakened. They affixed something else on his leg. The Charred retreated, and the officers vanished.

Zellion stumbled, barely able to stand upright. Then an announcement rang through the city. "People of Union!" The Cinder King's voice. Recorded previously? "You have heard of this offworlder, the one some are whispering is the Sunlit Man. He is here. I offer you a chance to watch him. See him fall."

The Cinder King walked slowly up to Zellion. Security cameras ringed the area, all tracking the Cinder King's every movement, filming as he dramatically unlocked the bracer on Zellion's wrist, took it off, then held it up, showing everyone that he'd freed his enemy. He tossed the bracer aside, then kicked away Zellion's fallen machete.

"Now then," the Cinder King said, raising his fists. "That duel of honor. You and me. Shall we?"

Zellion shook himself, attempting to recover his strength. Maybe this would actually be fair. He raised his fists, but found them sluggish. In fact, his entire body felt heavy, like he was tied with weights. He could barely get his fists into a fighting stance.

"What have you done to me?" he growled.

"A gift from our friends in the hidden ship," the Cinder King said. "The freezing bracers are fine, but they tend to knock out my subjects—and sometimes I want them alert. Just…a little bit disadvantaged."

"A little bit?" Zellion growled, shifting his stance, though even that took an uncomfortable amount of effort. "It's one of those Scadrian weight devices, isn't it? That's what you locked onto my ankle?" He'd seen people wear them on low-gravity planets to move more naturally. Here, though, it

had been turned up an extreme amount—making his entire body think it was working under three or four times the standard gravity.

The Cinder King smiled, then punched Zellion in the face. He tried to get his fists up to block, but was too slow, and then took a shot right in the gut. He stumbled back.

"Coward," Zellion growled.

"There is no cowardice in victory," the Cinder King said, striding forward.

Zellion got one good punch against the man, splitting his lip. Which healed immediately. Storms, how Invested was he?

Zellion came in again, but too slow, too sluggish. The Cinder King decked him across the face, sending him tumbling to the ground. Zellion took a kick in the stomach, then barely managed to roll away from the next.

He stumbled to his feet, straining, struggling.

"*This* is power," the Cinder King whispered, stepping closer to him, pulling off his gloves to expose his bare fists. A bad idea in a regular fight, as you were likely to do as much damage to your hands as you did to your enemy, but the Cinder King's Investiture would heal him from those surface wounds. "This is what it means to be strong."

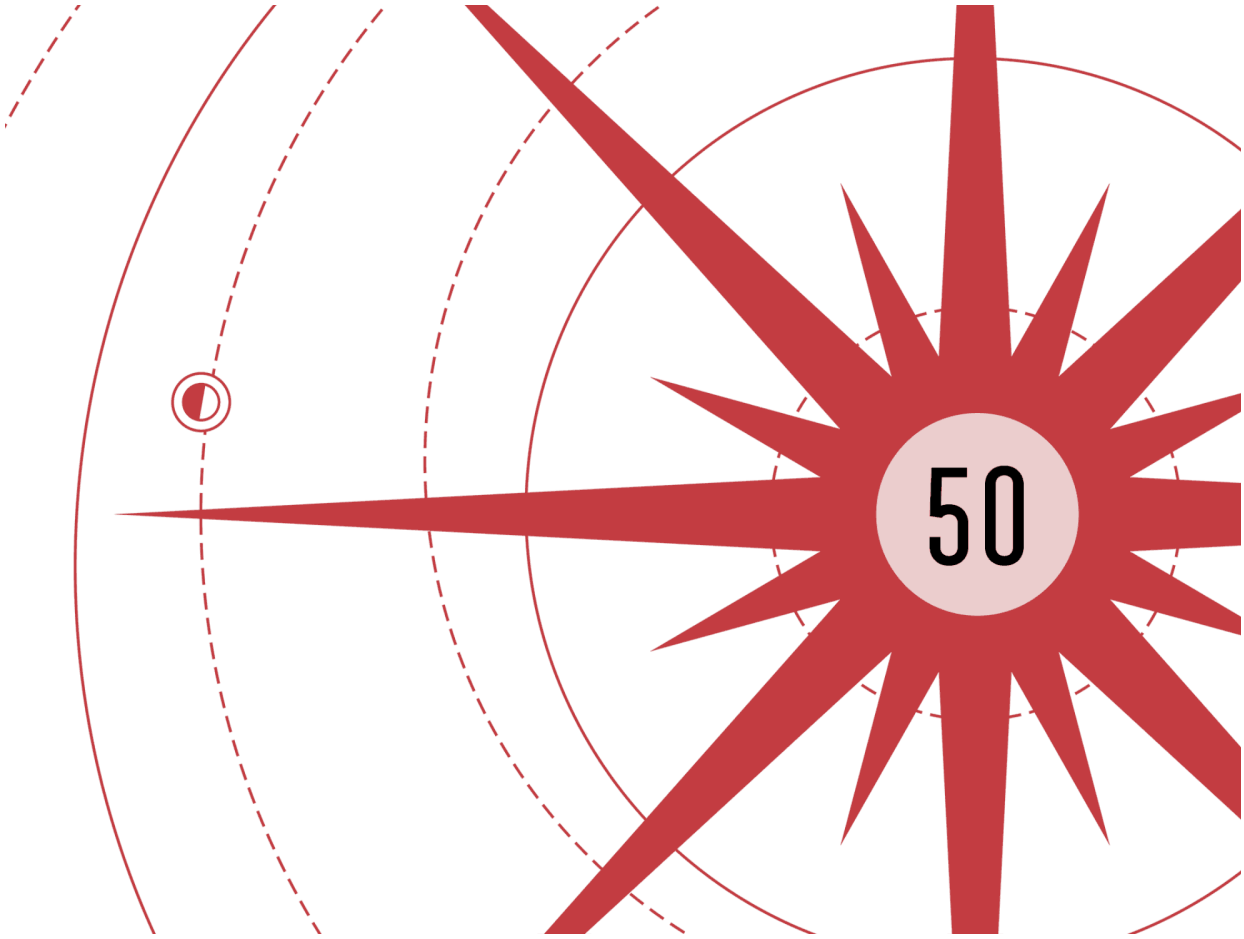
"Then why hide what you're doing from your people?" Zellion hissed. "You want to be able to beat me, but you don't want them to know how? That's not strength. It's fabrication."

"The condemned man always sees unfairness in the world around him," the Cinder King said, punching him again.

Damnation. That *hurt*. Blood began to flow from Zellion's nose as he stumbled back farther along the street. He didn't have Auxiliary to count his Investiture for him any longer, but he could feel it waning, fluttering. His endurance running out, his strength beginning to fail.

"In reality," the Cinder King said, "all I'm doing is using my advantages like you use yours." He laughed, punching Zellion in the stomach. "Come on, now. Let's make a good show of it, Sunlit. People will want to see you die with flair!"

He advanced, relentless, driving Zellion back. Once again, straight toward the rising sun.



ELEGY REMEMBERED THIS place. The unornamented metal steps to the lower level of the ship that made up the heart of Union. She remembered her footsteps on that metal; the sound echoed like the distant workings of some terrible machine.

That's what…that's what she'd become. A machine. A thing, not a person. Bereft of choice, personality, and soul. All had supposedly been burned away, leaving the Cinder King with his perfect killer.

But she remembered. Old memories. Not just when she'd been led from this place as a newborn Charred. But before. Just…those sounds. The footsteps. She remembered descending. Terrified. And she remembered… light?

She found a door at the bottom of the steps, left ajar by people entering in haste, dragging Rebeke behind them. How did *they* feel? Knowing some offworlder monster in a suit of strange armor was assaulting their city—and Charred were going wild—yet being ordered to go execute a captive?

Elegy pushed the door open the rest of the way, and the light was as she remembered it. Hundreds of sunhearts set into slots on the walls. The city's reserve. A mausoleum. Full of souls taken by the sun. And one Charred guard.

The man growled and charged at her as soon as she entered. Elegy blocked his swinging cudgel with her forearm and stared him in the eyes. For once, she didn't feel frantic. She felt haunted. Remembering those lights, being towed down this hallway, knowing everything she'd been—everyone she'd loved, everything she'd accomplished—would soon be burned out of her. Like a disease to be killed off by the coming fever.

She tossed the Charred to the side, which shook the wall and rattled the sunhearts. As he struggled to his feet, she took him down with a swift punch to the throat, leaving him gasping through his own blood. A second Charred burst in through the door, but again, she felt *calm* as she stepped aside, grabbing his arm and using his own momentum to slam him into the wall.

He dropped.

She remembered. Just the pain, though, and terror. She didn't remember *what* she'd loved, known, or believed. She only remembered knowing she'd lose it. That seemed a worse cruelty, to be left with the panic and pain, but not the original pieces of herself that had evoked such emotion. She pushed forward through the corridor lined with souls.

She stepped over the body of the first Charred and burst into the chamber where new Charred were made. Along the wall, a line of frightened people waited. New subjects to transform into Charred, to fight those she had freed, perhaps. Only three officials worked to prepare them, and they were being sloppy in their haste. For example, they strapped Rebeke into place without disrobing her.

That meant that as they engaged the machine, a spear tipped with a burning cinderheart descending to touch Rebeke's chest, it set her shirt aflame. Elegy remembered screaming when it had happened to her.

Rebeke looked to the side, toward Elegy, eyes wide with terror—and the light in them started to fade.

No.

No, not that.

Not to her.

Elegy screamed again, in tune with her scream in the past, and both moments resonated as one. She leaped across the room, grabbing the

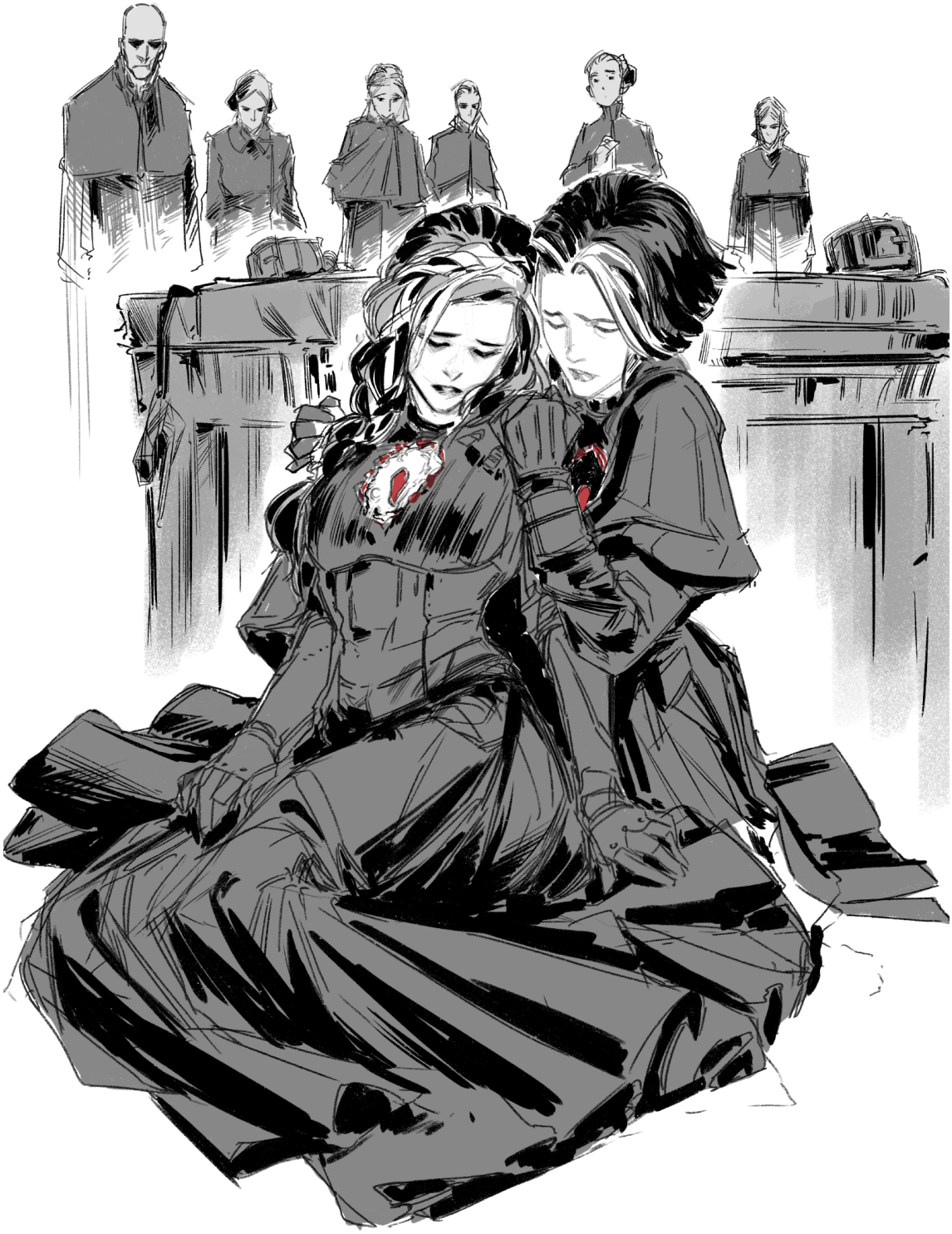
machinery and ripping the spear from its place. She pulled at Rebeke's bonds, breaking her free, and hauled the younger woman off the table.

But the cinderheart had implanted. Rebeke's skin turned ashen, darkening before the fire—which flared brighter and brighter.

No, no, no, *no*!

Elegy scrambled, feeling at her waist. Where had she slipped that sliver of sunheart? Rebeke was trembling, eyes unfocusing, a wail leaving her lips.

Elegy could feel it. The terrible fire at her core. Consuming everything, the moment stretching like heated metal, as loves vanished, hopes evaporated, memories became ash…



Shouting something raw—a word unformed—Elegy pulled her sister close and felt Rebeke's warmth against her hollow of a chest. Where her self had been destroyed. She clung to Rebeke and whispered the words. "Bold one on the threshold of death, give my cinderheart your heat, that you may remember and bless those who still live."

Their cinderhearts couldn't touch, not with Elegy's sunken so far into her core. She felt something anyway, a violent warmth coming into her from Rebeke. Through their skin, moving from one vessel to another.

That heat burned away the last memories Elegy had—mostly of pain, but also of this room, of those echoes of footsteps on metal. The final remnants of her old self died. But when she pulled away, she found that the cinderheart had stopped sinking into Rebeke's chest.

Instead it had embedded into her like a gemstone into a piece of jewelry—leaving her with a burst of ashen skin around it, creeping up her neck. Her breasts were whole, however, and her chest cavity had not sunken in or been burned away.

Rebeke blinked, then breathed in, her eyes focusing on Elegy. "E… Elegy?"

"Yes," Elegy said, shocked to feel tears on her cheeks. What was this feeling? It was nearly as overwhelming as the desire to kill.

"You stopped it," Rebeke said. "I'm still me. I remember…Elegy! You *saved* me. You're holding me, looking at me like… You remember me, don't you?"

"Yes," Elegy lied. Because it was the right thing to say, the right thing for her to be. "I…do not remember, but I *feel*. Some things. From before."

"The rest might return too!"

It wouldn't. Elegy was confident of that. She'd just given away what little *had* remained. Still, she had stopped Rebeke from being taken. That was enough. She settled her sister, then checked on the officials in the room, who had pressed themselves against the wall. One was reaching for a gun on the counter. Elegy met his gaze and shook her head.

He backed away, hands up. There were still those two Charred in the hallway, though. She had crushed the throat of one of them, but the second would still be dangerous. She checked on them, but found them standing in the corridor outside, eyes distant. As if dazed.

"Elegy," Rebeke said, "I can *feel* them. The Charred. Why can I feel them?"

“The cinderhearts link us,” she said, “through the Cinder King. The process didn’t complete with you, but perhaps you gained some of that link. Can you hear his thoughts?”

“No. But Elegy, how does the Cinder King control the others?”

“Through his cinderheart,” she said. “One that—” Elegy turned toward Rebeke and the glowing cinderheart embedded into her skin. “One that didn’t consume him like it did us.” She knelt, eager. “Can you control them?”

Rebeke frowned. “I…I’m trying.”

The Charred in the hallway looked toward her, heads cocked. But didn’t move.

“I’m trying to make those two come into the room and sit down,” Rebeke explained. “But something is blocking me.”

“The Cinder King.”

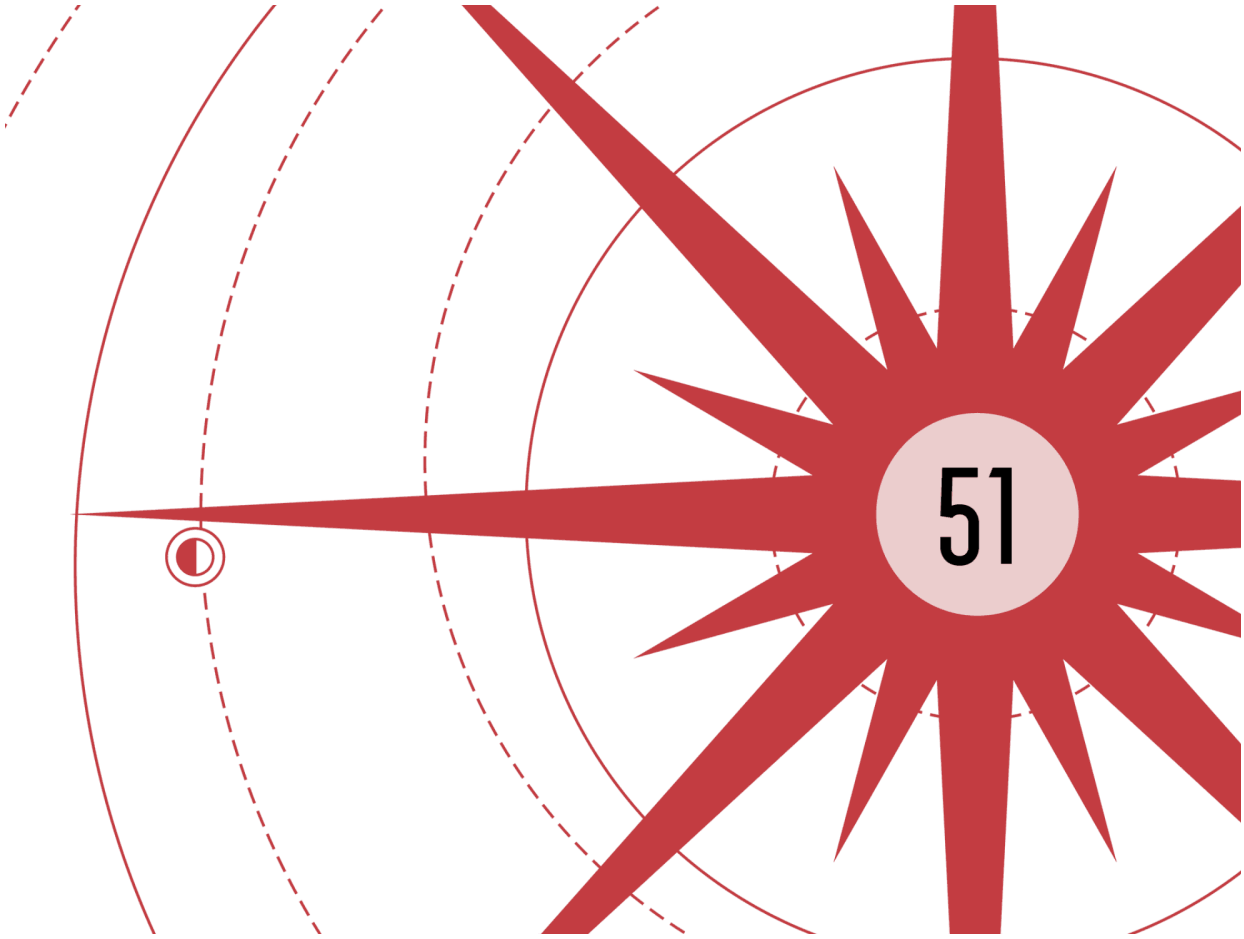
Rebeke nodded. “He’s stronger than I am, Elegy. But I think…I think the other Charred will ignore me—or at least not attack me. What should we do?”

“All I know is how to break things,” Elegy said. “You’ll have to make the difficult decisions.”

Rebeke grimaced at that, looking overwhelmed.

“Rebeke,” Elegy said. “Zellion is fighting the Cinder King. Before we separated, he asked me to tell you something. He said…there is a way to recharge sunhearts, so people don’t need to die to make more. The Beaconites know about it. He said the more people who know, the better.”

Rebeke’s frown deepened. Then she took a deep breath and stood up with Elegy’s help. “We need to get to Union’s command center.”



ZELLION ROLLED ACROSS the deck of Union, face bloody, ribs screaming. The Cinder King had bullied and beaten him all the way back to where he'd started—across the bloodied mess where he'd killed many Charred, to the edge of Union.

He forced himself to his feet once again. But storms, he hadn't landed a second punch. He couldn't fight back. How could he beat this man if he couldn't fight…

Couldn't fight back?

The absurdity of it struck him, and he found himself laughing—even though it sent a spike of agony through his chest. The Cinder King paused, frowning.

"Don't mind me," Zellion said, struggling to lift a hand to wipe his eyes—but failing, letting it flop back to his side. "I just realized something. I've been training to beat you this entire time."

"This is what 'beating me' looks like?" the Cinder King said, gesturing.

Zellion shrugged. His Torment, the stupid curse… It couldn't have been *preparing* him for this, could it?

He discarded the thought as ridiculous. The Torment wasn't *alive*; it didn't *plan*. It was a coincidence that he found himself in this spot, after being forced to engage enemies time and time again without being able to fight.

Storms. He had to get off this planet, or *everything* would start looking like part of some nebulous, deific plan. He nodded to the Cinder King, who came in to punch him again. This time, Zellion didn't try to block or dodge. He fell into the swing, grunting as it connected, but then grabbed the Cinder King by his clothing.

"Grappling," the man said, trying to pry free Zellion's fingers. "The coward's art."

"I know a few people who'd be seriously offended by that," Zellion said. Then held on tighter. His body was severely weighed down, but his finger strength had been unaffected, and so he managed to keep hold of the tyrant's clothing as the man spun them around, working to get free. The Cinder King eventually pushed his bare hand against Zellion's face and muttered something.

Heat began to flow from Zellion to the Cinder King, who—despite performing the maneuver purposefully—seemed shocked. "Wait. Why does that work *now*?"

"Because for some reason," Zellion said, "people still have faith in me. Thank you for turning us around."

The Cinder King met his eyes, then Zellion heaved toward him and let his weight topple them both backward. He wasn't in control. He just fell, using essentially the same maneuver he'd pulled on Elegy in the arena during their initial clash.

It worked just as well now as it had then. The Cinder King could struggle all he wanted, but he had made Zellion into a deadweight, four times as heavy as a man. You didn't simply shove that aside. Their momentum sent them both tumbling off the ship.

A brief fall followed, and then they hit the soft earth.

Zellion *saw* pain. It flashed across his vision with vibrant, garish colors as his already broken body was subjected to another terrible blow. Fortunately he broke his fall on the Cinder King.

"Idiot," the man said, shoving Zellion to the side. "What do you think you've done? Gotten me muddy?"

Zellion didn't have the breath to respond. Instead—arduous though the effort was—he stood up. Then raised his fists.

"You know," the Cinder King said, "I expected this to be a better show." He decked Zellion again, sending him to the mud.

And with effort, he got up.

"You should be a better fighter," the Cinder King said, tripping him, then kicking him in the broken ribs.

Zellion gasped, then—slowly—got up.

"This is almost *painfully* anticlimactic," the Cinder King said, attacking again.

Zellion took the blow.

Then got up.

And hoped it would be enough.

MOST TOWNS AND cities on Canticle had a central command—where the whole community could be steered when locked together—but not all of them had the restrictions Union did. Rebeke explained to Elegy as they arrived: People weren't free on Union. They couldn't unlock their ships without permission.

The door into the command bridge was guarded by five Charred…who simply let Elegy and Rebeke pass. It felt wrong to have them behind her—Elegy almost engaged them on principle, but refrained. Inside the main command room, they found a group of men and women in white coats in front of an array of monitors with security footage, watching Zellion and the Cinder King fight on a screen. The two had fallen to the grass and mud, and the camera was zoomed in, tracking their movements.

At Elegy and Rebeke's entrance, several of the people reached for guns. Elegy moved to attack, but Rebeke took her arm. "We can't fight them all."

Elegy could *absolutely* fight them all. She just probably wouldn't win.

"You're from Beacon," one of the officers said. "You're the sister of…" He focused on Elegy, then paled. "Of her."

"I've brought her to you," Rebeke said. "To speak and persuade you."

Wait.

What?

"Rebeke," Elegy said, taking the younger woman by the arm and whispering. "I can't do that."

“You said you were remembering,” Rebeke said, with what she probably thought was an encouraging smile. “Dig deep. You’re still in there, Elegy.”

Shades. “No. I’m not, Rebeke. I’m *really* not.”

“Then…”

“You need to do it,” Elegy said. “Say what I cannot.”

Rebeke turned to the others in the room, who were regarding them with confusion—but with guns still raised at the ready.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Rebeke said. “We’re not going to attack you. I just want you to listen.” She nodded toward the monitor they’d been watching. “Did the offworlder knock them down, off the city?”

The room was silent for a moment, then one woman—sitting at a control station—nodded.

“He’s trying to show you,” Rebeke said, “that the Cinder King is weak.” She paused then, cocking her head. Because Zellion was *not* giving a good showing in the fight. He kept getting knocked down. What had happened to his skill?

“The Cinder King is cheating, isn’t he?” Rebeke asked.

Again, the room was silent. Elegy would almost rather have gone the “fight them all and probably die” route. This silence was annoying.

“Yes,” a different operator finally said. “He usually does something like this. Makes it seem like he’s unstoppable.”

“He fights Charred sometimes,” another said. “But they’re always weakened first.”

“Thinks nobody knows,” another added. “But we all do. I mean, it’s obvious.”

“This is your chance,” Rebeke said, stepping forward. Then she stepped back again, raising her hands as their grips tightened on their weapons. “Look! He’s off the ship, and the sun is rising. All we need to do is fly. Leave him behind.”

“His Charred will kill us!” one of the operators said.

“The Charred who didn’t stop us from coming in here?” Rebeke said. “Things are changing. Everything is changing. Listen. We have learned how to *recharge* sunhearts.”

“What?” one of the men with a gun said, lowering it. “You lie.”

“No,” she said. “No more sacrifices. No more lotteries. No more immolating our parents.” Tears leaked down her cheeks as she stepped forward again, this time uncaring of the reaction. “I left my mother for the

sun. I watched my sister be taken, and my brother die to the Cinder King's own weapon. Haven't we sacrificed enough?"

"He's too strong!" one of the women said.

Rebeke waved to the monitor, where the Cinder King was forced to keep knocking Zellion down. "Does he *look* strong?"

Silence. This time, though, Elegy found herself thoughtful. She watched Zellion stand up again. She'd been wrong about Rebeke's strength. Had she been wrong here too?

Yes.

Because if the Cinder King couldn't break a man that he'd handicapped and beaten to a pulp, then what strength could he *possibly* pretend to possess?

There was so much to learn.

"I know," Rebeke said, "what it's like to feel powerless. I know you've felt it, watching what he's done to the city, to people you love. You've cowered before him because there was no other option.

"But today you have a *choice*. Steer us away. Leave him." Rebeke paused, then parted the remnants of her shirt, revealing her exposed cinderheart—and the skin burned around it.

A hush fell over the room.

"I," Rebeke said, "am the Sunlit One. I control the Charred now, and I have come to bring you freedom. I offer this, but do not demand. I will not force you because the *world is changing*. Today we make choices. Please."

Weapons lowered.

People exchanged looks.

Then finally the woman who had spoken first stood up. "Shades, *I'll* do it." She took the controls at the front of the room, and nobody stopped her.

With that, Union abandoned its king. Leaving him in the mud. And it was *so* gratifying to see his expression, filmed, as he watched it happen.

The people in the room settled down, seeming shocked by what they'd done—or allowed to be done. But one problem remained. Elegy took Rebeke by the arm and steered her to the side, speaking softly. "What of Zellion?"

"Shades," she said, turning to the room. "We need to send a ship to rescue the offworlder."

"Send a ship?" one of them asked. "Sunlit, the city is on lockdown by the Cinder King's order—we can't undo it. For one hour, no ships may leave, no matter what."

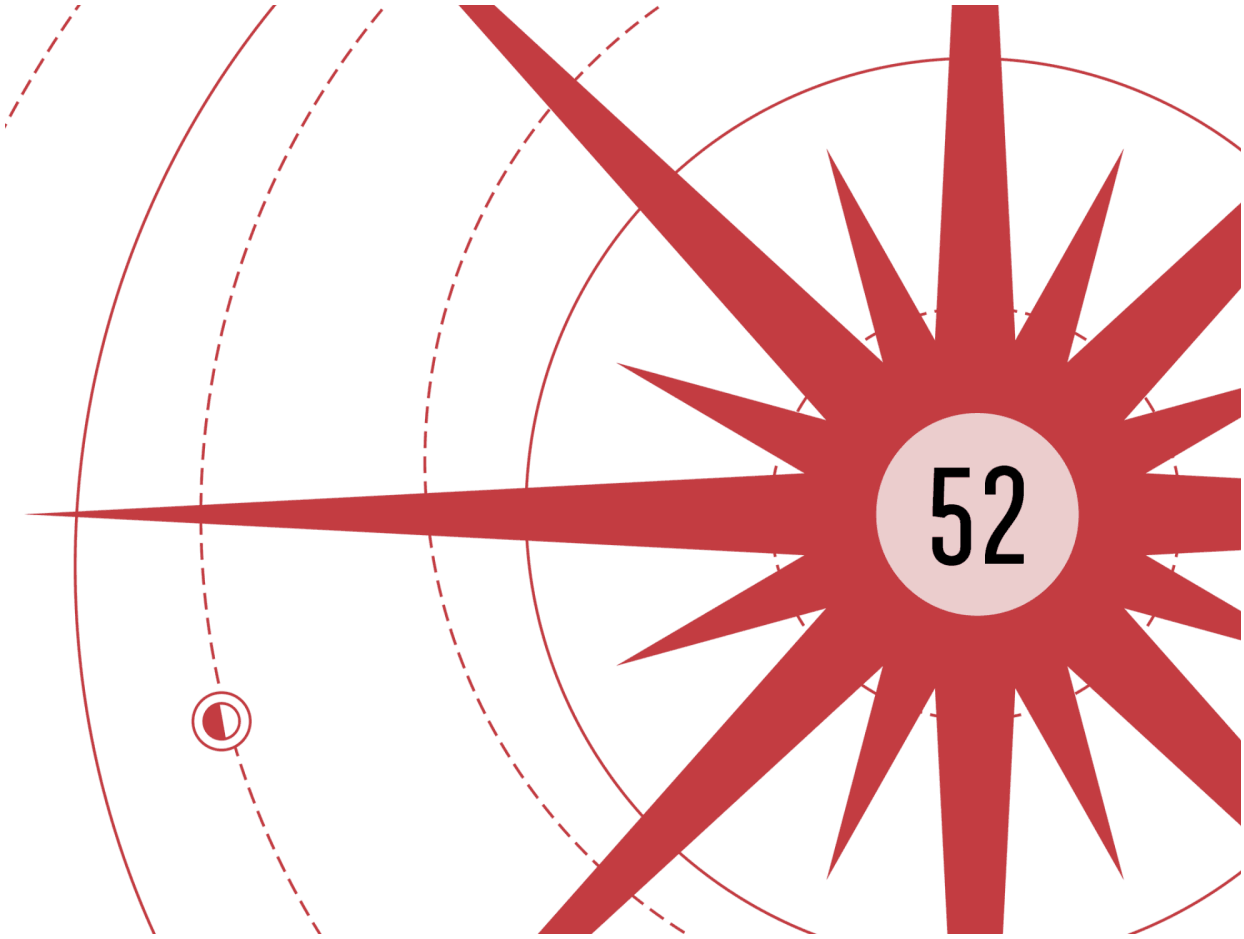
“The Cinder King is paranoid,” another said. “Only he can unlock it. Until the time is up.”

“Guess he never thought we’d fly the whole thing off without him…” a woman added.

Rebeke turned. “We need to get the ship Zellion flew in on…” She trailed off as she saw it in the background on the monitor. The *Dawnchaser* lay in a smoldering heap.

It had served them well, been through the great maelstrom and back. But it would never fly again. Particularly not with the sunlight advancing, relentless. Dangerously close to the two struggling men—mere specks now that the city was moving away at full speed.

“Farewell, killer,” Elegy said, holding Rebeke as she wept. “And thank you, in turn, for giving *me* someone to fight *with*. Not merely someone to fight beside.”



THE CINDER KING jogged after the city a short distance, but even with his Investiture, he would never be able to catch up to it. Nor could he outrun the sun. Zellion knew. He had tried.

He grinned as the man turned back, wild-eyed, light from the horizon reflecting on his face.

"You," the Cinder King said, stalking to him, "will summon that armor again and give it to me."

"Can't," Zellion said, exhausted.

The Cinder King growled, prowling forward, seizing Zellion by the sides of his head. "Then I will kill you."

"You'll die in turn."

"No," the Cinder King said. "I read that book. I know about your tool, your weapon. The Shardblade? I know that if you die, it will be left at your side. To be claimed." He pointed. "You left a shield around those people. What happens when I kill you? It vanishes, doesn't it?"

Zellion gritted his teeth.

Yes. If he died, his weapon would appear by his side. Unbonded.

"I will take it and protect myself," the Cinder King said, draining Zellion's heat.

A deep coldness crept through Zellion, like frost growing on his bones. He gasped.

"And then," the Cinder King said, "when the city returns, they will see me for what I am. *Immortal.*"

Such freezing cold, it made his heart shudder.

"I will flay those who betrayed me," the Cinder King whispered. "None will ever stand against me again. Not while I wield the beautiful sword of the offworlder. I will unify everyone. A single, glorious city, ruled by one man."

Zellion felt that chill growing, and everything becoming as frost. And yet…

He hadn't made an oath to protect those people.

But he'd *promised* Auxiliary. In the moment, that word was far, *far* stronger. Zellion dug deep inside and found a spark that—long ago—had driven him to take to the skies.

It wasn't redemption, but it might have been remembrance. Auxiliary had told him to go on. And storm it, he would.

He grabbed the Cinder King's wrists, whispering, "Bold one on the threshold of death, give me your heat, that it may bless those who still deserve it."

"A prayer to the dead?" the man said with a chuckle.

"No," Zellion said. "To the *dying*."

He met the man's eyes.

Then pulled the heat from him.

The Cinder King gasped, trying to yank free. Sunlight broke nearby, and Zellion could hear the coming flames. Plants writhed around them before starting to brown.

"Stop!" the Cinder King said.

Heat flooded Zellion as he, now a child of Canticle—but Tormented with the strange ability to feed on Investiture—claimed this man's power in a rush. The Cinder King had been gathering it for so long, taking the heat from others without fear of retribution, that it had built up inside of him. Making his eyes glow. Burdening his soul with the belief that because he could take whatever he wanted, he was great.

"*STOP!*" the man screamed, eyes wide.

"You know the problem," Zellion said, "with ruling by tyranny? There's always someone *stronger*."

The Cinder King struggled frantically, but the glow inside him went out. His eyes became normal, just a common dull hazel. The cinderheart at his chest dimmed, and Zellion found himself *bursting* with energy.

He missed deeply the opportunity to hear Auxiliary's voice telling him one final time his current Investiture threshold. But he didn't need it. One hundred percent Skip capacity achieved, and likely exceeded.

"Enjoy your first sunrise," Zellion whispered. "It will be the best one you see in your entire life."

Light and fire washed over them, and the Charred ex-king burst into flame, his skin shriveling and becoming ash, his very eyes hissing steam and bursting.

In that moment, Zellion activated his Torment, using the huge store of power the Cinder King had prepared for him. Skipping away from the planet, out into the cosmere.

Continuing his journey.

EPILOGUE

ELEGY DROPPED FROM the ship and ran across the dark, muddy ground. Rebeke followed more reservedly, steering a small hover-platform. Only one rotation, and already she was acting with so much decorum, one might think she'd been born to leadership.

They found the sunken pit the scouts had reported. A large hole in the ground, with several feet of mud at the bottom. Within it, waving excitedly, were the people of Beacon. Some waded in the mud, while the young had been placed on top of the powerless ships.

They'd survived. An entire half rotation in the sun, and they'd *survived*. Elegy stood there, grinning, practicing her normal emotions—then leaped to Rebeke's platform as it descended. She got her sister muddy, but who cared? Mud happened all the time.

The Beaconites got out of the way of the engine on the bottom of the platform, which sent pungent steam up from boiling mud as it landed.

Several other ships lowered ropes for the stronger to climb, but this platform was for the elderly.

Three women were soon helped up. Muddy, exhausted, the Greater Good had withstood their ordeal. They looked to Rebeke, who had found a dress she could wear that was cut low to reveal her cinderheart and scarred skin.

Compassion understood first. "Sunlit…Woman?"

"Sunlit One," Rebeke said softly.

"The Cinder King?" Confidence asked.

"Dead," Rebeke said. "We hope to recover his sunheart and use it to power Union for a while. It feels appropriate."

"You need to hear," Contemplation said, smiling a wan smile as the platform lifted off to take them to Union to recover. "There is a way to *recharge* sunhearts."

Rebeke nodded. "He told us. Before he…left."

The three women looked to her. The word lingered. They didn't know for certain. Might not ever know for certain. Had he somehow survived, or had the sun taken him?

But Elegy's heart—which she was training to feel joy—wanted to believe. The dome had stayed up for the day, protecting the Beaconites, before vanishing and leaving only a pit of mud. She had an instinct that said when they recovered the Cinder King's sunheart—the last one that would ever need to be made—it would be alone there in the soil.

"We have work to do," Rebeke said softly as they rose into the sky. "We've already had some communication with people from other corridors—one group even sent a delegation. But we need to reach them *all* and tell them what we've found. We give this information away freely, as it was given freely to us. We *stop* the sacrifices."

"As you wish, Sunlit," Contemplation said.

"No," she said, smiling. "Not as I wish. You are our rulers."

"But—" Confidence gestured to the cinderheart in Rebeke's chest.

"This lets me control the Charred," Rebeke said. "But we're trying to wake them up slowly, to teach them. And I won't see any more of them made. We'll use them for protection, so long as they choose. But I will not be another tyrant. I will be…a symbol, Confidence. A beacon. Nothing more." She smiled, looking to Elegy. "As my sister taught us."

Elegy still hoped she'd get to fight now and then. But if not…well, she was just going to have to find new emotions and activities to enjoy.

And as they rose into the sky, she found that—instead of sounding boring—it felt like an adventure.

STAFF SERGEANT TRUTH-IS-WAITING withdrew from his conference with the people of the floating city. He slouched as he walked, certain these people would be intimidated by military discipline. He didn't want them to remember him. He was on tenuous enough ground, pretending to be from a town in another "corridor" come for explanations.

He slipped into the ship he'd stolen from the first town they'd visited. Inside, other members of the Night Brigade watched the door with hands on weapons. They stood down as he nodded to them, then he slipped into the cab.

The Admiral waited here. They had an admiral, despite being an army. It was their way. Tall, with short black hair and a full military uniform, she stood facing away from him, her hands stiff at her sides. The Admiral was… not the kind to rest. He didn't think he'd ever walked in during a mission and found her sitting.

"Report," she said quietly, resting a hand on her Continuity Chain—the silver, whiplike weapon rolled up and hung at her hip.

"He was here," Truth-Is-Waiting said. "They talk about it freely. He reportedly died about a day back, local time. Fighting the king of this place."

"Died?" the Admiral said, her back still to him.

"Reportedly. Shall we pry for information the, uh, more painful way?"

"You think they have any useful answers to give?"

"Frankly, sir? No."

She tapped her foot in thought.

"I did find something fun," he said. "Scadrian ship, embedded here. Doing 'science.' They had him and didn't report it to us—or even send an amiable greeting. Rude, don't you think?"

She turned to him, eyes glittering, a rare smile turning up the corners of her lips. "Very rude."

"Maybe," he said, "we should pay them a visit and see what *they* know." He shrugged. "Besides. Folks here are our cousins. Feels wrong to slag them for being in the wrong place."

"Being in the wrong place," she said, "is the main reason people get slagged, Truth."

He shrugged again.

"We'll proceed with the Scadrians," the Admiral said. "They will have recordings. We'll find those *far* more reliable than accounts from a bunch of backwater peasants anyway. I have a feeling he's one step ahead of us again. How does he do it?"

"Figure he's just rightly scared."

She didn't reply. But as he left, two shades—with glowing red eyes, bearing the uniforms they'd been wearing when they'd died—joined him from the corners of the room. The Admiral needed no vocal command for them, and their movement meant she obviously wanted to be alone. Not even accompanied by the dead.

She did not like hearing that their prey had slipped away again. Truth hustled to the main chamber.

It was best she remain alone during a time like this.

ZELLION SAT ON the beach, listening to the water roll across the sand, feeling…strange to be out in the sun. Just a normal one, but still. He kept feeling like he should be hiding.

He had a good sense of time, but it was stressful to sit there, waiting. Marking the passing of counted heartbeats with scratches in the sand. Until he was *reasonably* certain that, back on Canticle, the Beaconites would be out of the sunlight and into the darkness.

If he waited too long, they'd suffocate. So he had to use his best guess and summon the weapon back when he thought it was safe. It appeared in his hand as a sword, and he used it to—at long last—cut that stupid weight-increasing band off his leg.

He stretched, feeling freed from a thousand pounds. And yet, another weight replaced it—one upon his soul.

"Did I get the timing right?" he asked. "Did I just burn them alive or did I set them free? Did they get crushed by dirt above? Did Elegy save Rebeke?"

Silence. Auxiliary was dead. Worse than dead, burned away entirely—nothing remaining in the Cognitive Realm. This sword was now a corpse, one truly separated from the soul that had inhabited it.

No voice interrupted his musings to act as a replacement for his withered conscience. He was completely alone.

He'd likely never know what happened to Rebeke, Elegy, the Greater Good, and all the other Beaconites. Because he couldn't afford to look backward, didn't dare bring the forces that chased him anywhere *near* people he cared about. If he ever returned there, they'd know the place meant something to him. Everyone he'd ever spoken to there would become a target.

He had to hope that, since he'd only been there a short time, nobody would realize how deeply he'd come to care for the planet and its people.

In the distance, he spotted another boat. They passed this way often, though he saw no other land in the area. Just this atoll he'd appeared on—and it had been a few inches under water during the recent tide change. It lacked even a single tree.

He groaned softly, climbing to his feet, then formed Aux into a mirrored shield and used it to catch the sunlight. In minutes, the ship had turned his way. The people crewing it turned out to be Sho Del of all things. He hadn't known there were any enclaves of them off Yolen.

Their small ship arrived, and he waded out to meet it. It was time to start running again.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

THIS IS THE ONLY one of the Kickstarter books I wrote while knowing what might end up happening with them.

Let me explain. I wrote *Tress* on a whim, as a gift for my wife. The experience was so much fun that I wanted to try something again, and I had extra time because of COVID-19. I started toying with other stories—and I landed on *Frugal Wizard*. I wrote it, kind of, for myself. A way to prove I could keep going with the momentum I'd built working on *Tress*. A way to do something new, and different, for me.

Yumi was another gift for my wife. I'd written a story in *Tress* based on a prompt she suggested, but with *Yumi*, I really wanted to drill down and write a story *for* her—something I thought she would love. And when I was finished, I had three books, and the "Year of Sanderson" idea started to bud in my mind. I thought that four books, one per quarter, would be the best way to go about that. It *felt* right. I wanted another book.

And I wanted to write a book for you.

The other secret projects were experimental uses of voice. They either weren't Cosmere or had only tangential connections to the Cosmere. I love them all, and I'm absolutely proud of them. This isn't to indicate otherwise. But I knew if I was going to do the Year of Sanderson, I also wanted one book that was more "mainline" Cosmere, dealing with a character I'd planned to be vital to future events, and building up Cosmere lore, not just on side planets, but in an important way.

And so this book is a gift for you. As *Tress* and *Yumi* are gifts for Emily, I designed this for everyone who has been following my journey through all these years. It's still an experiment; I wanted, in this case, to write an epic fantasy with a more breakneck pace. I also wanted to play with some genre tropes I hadn't used before. (Same as the other secret projects.) In this, my guide was old westerns and their modernized versions, like the Mad Max films—stories about the wanderer who gets embroiled in a local problem and then is forced to move on after helping the people there.

Sigzil's story has been building in my mind for quite some time now. My fifth (unpublished) book is called *The Sixth Incarnation of Pandora*. (Maybe my worst title, I know. I never managed to find the right name for it.) It's about an immortal warrior named Zellion, who has lived too long and lost connection to the world around him because he's lost connection to people. My online handle for many a game over the years has been Zellion—mostly because it's a name people don't often take.

In addition, the first Cosmere story I can ever remember writing was about Hoid traveling to a new planet, investigating the magic, and determining if the people there would be good candidates to join an ongoing conflict of a nature that might be too spoilerific to mention here. I never finished that story, written sometime in the '90s, but the idea stayed with me—of someone hopping between worlds in the Cosmere, getting stranded, and being forced to learn the magic to escape.

I connected both of these ideas to Sig while writing the Stormlight Archive. I built out his story in my mind—the apprentice to Hoid who was given a Dawnshard for a short time, and now has to live with an unexpected kind of immortality. I was never satisfied with Hoid as the one warping to new worlds and figuring out the magic, as it didn't fit the right tone for him. I wanted something dynamic, with a chase going on, which would interfere with the things I planned for Hoid to do. (For a short time, Shai was going to be the one bouncing between worlds, though without the Dawnshard connection that I'd flagged for Sigzil.)

Regardless, that's probably more information than you needed! The relevant point is that in late 2021 I realized that I finally had the chance to write Zellion's story. I chose it as the last secret project, as a thank-you to all of you, but also a way to explore a character I'd been meaning to write about for quite some time. This book marks a kind of event for me, as it's my fiftieth novel. Something I find very cool, as it ties back to my fifth novel, written all those years ago. I can't promise I'll do any more stories directly about Sig, but he's relevant for the future of the Cosmere, so he will return. I truly hope you've enjoyed my experimentation with my style and the types of narratives within the Cosmere.

This is one of my last chances to talk to many of you about the wonderful event that was the Kickstarter, so let me take an extra moment to tell you why I dedicated this book to you, the fans.

I sincerely believe that books don't live until they're read. While I think I'd write even if nobody was reading—it's who I am—I thrive because I know the stories are being brought to life by all of you. In this, stories are a special kind of art, particularly ones written down. Each of you imagines this book, and its characters, a little differently—each of you puts your own stamp on it, making it yours. I don't think a story is quite finished until that has happened to it—until the dream in my head has become a reality (even if briefly) in yours.

And so this book is yours, as are all of them once you read them. Thank you so much for bringing life to my work, and to the Cosmere.

Brandon Sanderson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRANDON SANDERSON grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. He lives in Utah with his wife and children and teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University. In addition to completing Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time, he is the author of such bestsellers as the Mistborn saga, *Warbreaker*, the Stormlight Archive series beginning with *The Way of Kings*, *The Rithmatist*, the Skyward series, the Reckoners series beginning with *Steelheart*, and the Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians series. He won the Hugo Award for *The Emperor's Soul*, a novella set in the world of his acclaimed first novel, *Elantris*. For behind-the-scenes information on all his books, visit brandonsanderson.com.

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